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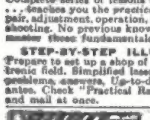

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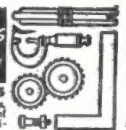

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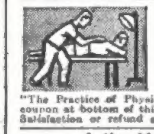

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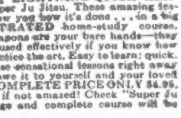

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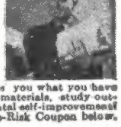

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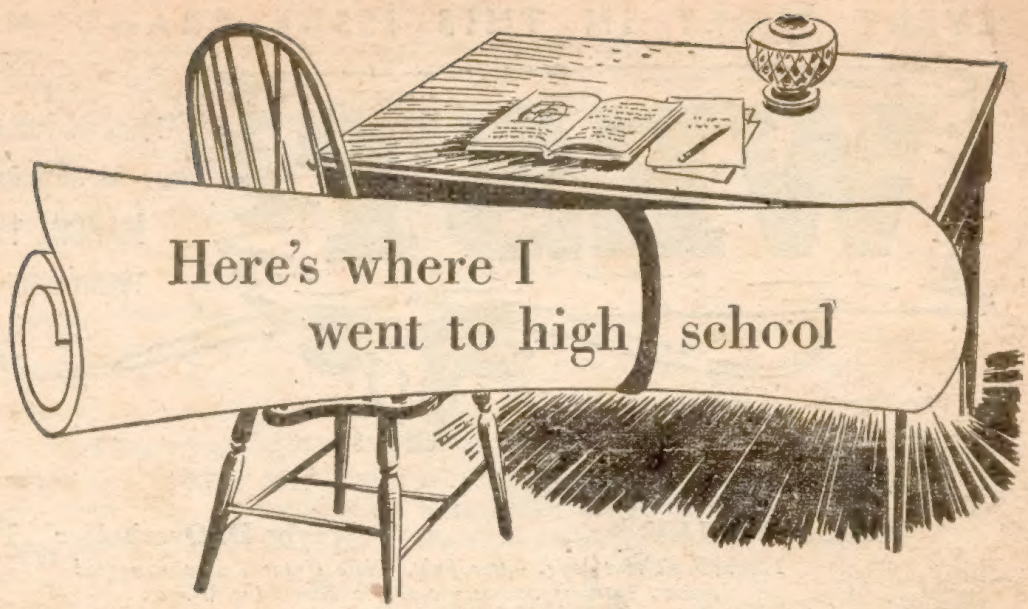

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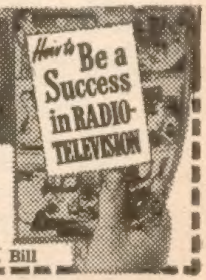

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The Chuck Wagon

THE WOLF MOUNTAIN EXCITEMENT

By RAYMOND COLWELL

TWO MOUNTED men, each leading a packhorse, rode slowly up Deadwood's Main Street late in 1876. Heads bent down against the bitter snow-laden winds which funneled down the narrow canyon below the junction of Deadwood and Whitewood Gulches, they plodded along in the November dusk, past the noisy Bella Union Dance Hall, then by the Number 10 saloon, where Wild Bill Hickok had been killed by Jack McCall some three months before. The doors of the Gem Theater, notorious even in tolerant Deadwood, opened for a moment as they passed, to let a bouncer toss a cursing, retching drunk on his face.

The front rider looked up for an instant as his horse shied around the recumbent figure and jerked his reluctant packhorse into a slow trot. A few doors farther on, he nodded to his companion. Dismounting with the stiffness of men long in the saddle on a cold winter day, they entered a general store crowded with men making purchases.

As they gratefully soaked up the searing heat from one of the big wood-burning stoves, a bystander spoke to them.

"Terrible night, ain't it? Come far?"

The taller of the two replied briefly, "So-so" and turned toward the grocery counter. Joined by his companion, he pulled a paper out of his pocket and gave it to a clerk.

"We're going to pull out early in the morning," he explained. "Put this stuff up for us, so we can pick it up before you close up tonight."

The clerk added up the list.

"That'll be ninety-five dollars. Want to pay for it now, or when you get it?"

"Now's good enough," answered the one who seemed to be the leader.

He brought out a heavy buckskin pouch from which he poured gold dust into the pan of the small scales the clerk placed on the rough counter, ignoring the covert glances of the bystanders.

Carefully returning the bulging poke to his pocket, he was turning away when a hearty voice yelled:

"Hey, Slim! Wait up a minute!"

As he looked around, a weather-beaten miner strode toward him with outstretched hand.

"Thought you'd pulled out from the Black Hills last summer, Slim! Where you been keeping yourself?"

"Oh, around and about, Frank."

"Prospecting?"

"Some, yeah. I'm glad I met up with you. Come over here."

As the men standing around eyed them curiously, the trio retired to a quiet corner. In spite of their best efforts, all that any of the rest heard was Slim's last remark as the

(Continued on page 127)

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BANG! BANG!
NAILED HIM, EH? WHAT THE...!
I FIGURED HE'D HEAD FOR THE CLEARING. SO, I TOOK A SHORT-CUT AND...
GOT HERE JUST IN TIME TO SAVE MY LIFE!
WHEN WE BORROWED JEB'S CAR, WE SHOULDA TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!

WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY
LATER
BLADES. YOU BET! TRY THIS THIN GILLETTE
WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP

YOU ENJOY SWELL, EASY SHAVES... QUICK AND CLEAN... WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY ARE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD AND FAR OUTLAST ALL OTHERS. MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES CANNOT SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE

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"Keep Your Seat, Mr. Greeley!"

A True Story of the Pioneer Stagecoaches

THE perfection of staging was accomplished by the Pioneer Line in California. The six-horse stagecoaches traveled well-graded mountain roads that in summer were sprinkled to keep down dust. The sprinkling carts were supplied from great wooden supply tanks, stationed about every three miles along the highway. Nevertheless, it was a thrilling ride, for the stages traveled on a timetable and the drivers, according to a passenger who rode the Pioneer line in 1865, ". . . whirled along the dizzy road at the great speed of twelve miles an hour—swift as Sheridan's Ride and thrilling as the Charge of the Six Hundred!"

During the early days of this line, the roads were not graded, but were, of course, just as winding and even more dangerous. But the coaches kept to their timetable, and several amusing stories are told about this.

One concerns Horace Greeley, who had occasion to ride the Pioneer coaches in 1859. He had a lecture engagement in Placerville and was worried that he wouldn't reach there in time to fulfill it. His driver was Hank Monk, a Jehu of a driver—when he judged the road suitable. Twice in the first few miles of the ride Mr. Greeley urged Monk to hurry, but received no heed from the competent stager. At last the summit of the road was reached. Then the long-idle whip cracked and Hank Monk began to drive—and Horace Greeley began singing another tune.

Tossed about in the bounding coach, which was tearing along beside fearful precipices where a single misstep could send vehicle and riders rolling over to certain death, Mr. Greeley protested that, on second thought, he was sure a half-hour later for him would make no material difference in his schedule.

"Keep your seat, Mr. Greeley," replied the imperturbable Hank Monk, with a fresh crack of the whip, "and I'll get you to Placerville on time!"

Later, admiring Californians presented Monk with a gold watch bearing the above words as an inscription!

Another time a self-important judicial personage had about the same experience. The coach was late and Monk was trying to make up time. The judge vainly expostulated with Monk and at last thundered out: "I will have you discharged before the week is out! Do you know who I am, you ruffian?"

"Oh, shore I do!" replied Monk. "But I'll get this coach into Carson City on time if I kill every one-horse judge in California!"

Hank Monk didn't lose his job. Those were the days of independence with a capital "I."

—DORIS E. POGUE

A Novel by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

HIGH VALLEY

CHAPTER I

Chore Boy

IT WAS cold for September, cold even for Rainbow Basin, and the wind that funneled down from the Big Bear range to the west had a bite that gave the morning a January feel. Grant Talbot, tightening the cinch on his buckskin, glanced at the mountains and shook his head. It had snowed up there again last night, and it would still take several days of hard riding to finish gathering the steer herd that was to be delivered in Placerville early in October.

"Grant."

It was Mrs. Dexter, standing on the front porch of the Wagon Wheel ranchhouse, the wind tugging at her red hair, her right hand holding the collar of her maroon robe tightly around her neck.

Grant thought angrily, "She's aiming to send me on some errand a chore boy could do."

Bruce Mayer grinned at him with taunting insolence. He said, "The widow wants you, Boss."

Grant glanced around at the Wagon Wheel crew. They were all grinning, even Dick Sharples, Grant's *segundo* and the steadiest of the lot. They knew as well as he did what Linda Dexter would say. "Shake the range down, will you, Grant? It just won't draw this morning." Or, "Cut some kindling, won't you, Grant?" Or,

Piper lunged at Grant, a knife in his right hand

Through all that long bitter fight, while Grant Talbot

struggled against ruthless interests eager to annex the

Wagon Wheel, a woman's challenge rang in his ears. . . .

Rainbow Basin Was Tough—and the Ramrod Had

"Ride into town for me, will you, Grant? I'm out of perfume."

Well, it hadn't been quite that bad, but Bruce Mayer would make out that it was. A lot of good it did to ramrod an outfit and have the owner use him for an errand boy. "Might as well marry the woman," Mayer had said a dozen times. "She couldn't boss a husband around no more than she does you."

Grant stepped into the saddle. "Get moving." He swung a hand toward the aspen-covered foothills to the west. "You don't need me along to tell you what to do."

Mayer tucked his chin against the back of his clasped hands, looking coyly at Grant. "But I need to tell you what to do, Granty," he said in a falsetto voice. "I lost my hanky. Won't you look for it in the pile of dresses that's underneath my petticoats?"

"Bruce," Grant said in a low tone, "so help me, one of these days I'm going to knock so many teeth down your throat you'll be gumming your grub for the rest of your life."

MAYER threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"I'm scared, Grant, I'm scared." Wheeling his horse, he let the animal pitch a few times. Then, cracking steel to him, he rode toward the foothills, Dick Sharples and the rest stringing out behind him.

"Grant, are you coming?" Linda Dexter called again, her voice edgy.

She was still there on the porch, looking cold enough to crack if she took a step. Grant said, "I'm coming," and turned his horse toward the house.

For the life of him Grant could not understand why old Joe Dexter had married Linda. She'd been twenty-five and Joe had been over sixty. It hadn't worked from the first because Linda was as out of place here on the Wagon Wheel as a canary with a flock of crows. Old Joe had done his best to make her happy, but he had missed by a cow country mile.

Now Joe was dead. Broken his neck when he'd fallen from the trail to High Valley, or so the sheriff, Steve Ollard, said, a conclusion with which Grant did not agree. It had happened three months ago, and Linda had been leaning on Grant with steadily increasing weight ever since.

Linda waited on the front porch until Grant dismounted in front of the house and stepped up beside her. He said harshly, "You know how much work we've got to do, Linda. I can't be running kid errands for you all the time if we're going to get Ira Connors off our necks this fall."

She shivered as a stronger blast of wind struck at her. Grant thought she was about to cry, and that always got him. He said hastily, "All right. What is it?"

"Come inside," she said, and led the way into the house.

Grant followed reluctantly. It didn't look right for Linda to start chasing a man so soon after Joe had been killed. It wouldn't have bothered Grant if it had been some other man, but he was woman-shy, especially when the woman was a pusher.

Linda waited at the kitchen door until Grant came through, then closed it behind him. "It's warm in here," she said. "I just about froze to death outside. Isn't this a terrible country, Grant? September would still be summer anywhere else."

"I don't think it's a terrible country," he said.

She looked at him gravely. "It's a good cow country, so you like it. What it does to a woman isn't important."

He thought about Mamie Dolan who owned the Seven Bar Seven on the other side of Bell Creek. Three years ago she had been bucked off a horse, and the fall had injured her back so that her legs were paralyzed. She spent every waking hour in a wheel-chair, usually on the front

porch of her log house where she could look enviously across the valley to the rich graze that belonged to the Wagon Wheel, look and hate Joe Dexter's widow with all the intensity of a violent nature. The country had not dampened Mamie's

GRANT TALBOT

Ramrod of the Wagon Wheel

spirit, but there was no use pointing that out to Linda.

"I might as well be riding if that's all you wanted."

"No. Sit down." She motioned to the table. "I'll pour you a cup of coffee."

"Don't want one," he said brusquely, and was ashamed of his tone of voice.

He sat down and took the makings from his vest pocket, noting that Linda's breakfast dishes were still on the table, and it didn't look as if she'd eaten much. She sat down across from him, her blue eyes on him.

LINDA'S red hair hung down her back, gathered by a small blue ribbon at the base of her neck. Her robe had fallen open below her chin. He could see the top of her nightgown and the upper swell of her breasts. He lowered his gaze to his cigarette. She had no business running around in her nightgown. He wondered what Bruce Mayer would say if he knew about it.

"I don't understand you, Grant," Linda said worriedly. "I've tried to be nice to you and you've treated me like dirt."

"I work for you." Grant still stared at his cigarette. "That's all. I just work for you."

"It could be a lot more," she said. "At least I haven't got in your way. I mean, I don't know the cattle business. You do, and I've been smart enough not to tell you how to run the ranch."

"Thanks," he said.

"I'm thanking you for being loyal and working as hard as you have. I know you ought to be with the crew, and I know that if we don't pay the bank off this fall, Ira Connors will make it rough on us, but there's something I've got to tell you."

He fired his smoke, glancing at her briefly. Pretty enough, he thought, with her bright red hair and blue eyes and full, rich lips, pretty enough to have nailed old Joe when he'd gone to Denver for a good time. Neither Joe nor Linda had said where they met, but it had been respectable enough. Grant was sure of that, for he didn't believe the gossip Mamie Dolan had started. But it didn't make any difference. Linda wasn't for him, and he would probably wind up telling her so straight out.

"Go ahead," he said. "Tell me."

"I don't know why Joe asked me to marry him," she said miserably. "Of course I wanted a younger man, and I

told him I didn't love him the way a woman ought to love her husband, but it didn't make any difference. He wanted me. Grant, I tried to make him happy. I tell you I tried."

He looked at her taut, worried face, thinking he could argue with her about how hard she'd tried, but he let it go. He said, "I never claimed you didn't. I reckon Joe was happier after you came than he was before."

"Thank you, Grant. It makes me feel good to hear you say that." She lowered her eyes. "What I wanted to say was that I can't stand it here any more. Nobody to talk to. Nowhere to go. Living through one day that's just like the one before it. Nothing to do but scrub and dust, and no one to see the house after I get it clean."

He rubbed his cigarette out. "I could get a Mexican woman in town. She can do your housework. And about going somewhere. There's dances—"

"I know," she broke in. "After a widow mourns so long she can go to dances and maybe get another man. Owning the Wagon Wheel would make me a pretty good catch, I suppose."

"You're a good catch several ways. You're pretty. Take a little more time and you'll have every man in the basin camping on your front steps."

"Except Grant Talbot," she said in a low voice.

"I work for you," he said again. "I don't know why I have to keep saying it."

"It doesn't bother Bruce Mayer. He's asked me to marry him."

"I ain't Bruce Mayer."

"I've found that out." She put her hands on the table. "There's no use to keep fooling myself. I don't belong out here. I made a mistake marrying Joe and leaving Denver. Now the best thing I can do is to go back. I'm selling the Wagon Wheel."

SO THAT was it. He rose, automatically reaching for the makings again, and walked to the window. He had been afraid this would happen. He felt the hammering of his temple pulse; he fought down an impulse to turn her over his knee and spank her as he would have disciplined a wilful child.

He stood looking eastward across the broken floor of the basin. In the distance he could make out the vague shape of the town of Rocky Fork. Not much of a town, but it had survived through good years and bad years, through hot summers and cold winters, and it would continue to survive.

He thought of Ira Connors, the banker, who would walk across town for a penny but was absolutely honest to the letter, if not the spirit of the law. He thought of Sheriff Steve Ollard who, when he was younger, would have followed a man to hell and back if convinced the man was wanted by the law, but now had become lazy with nothing to do, and of Marty Reem who owned the Mercantile. He remembered a story Joe Dexter had often told about Reem.

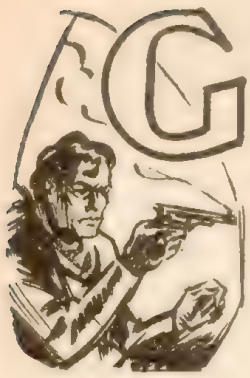
It had happened years ago, long before Grant had come to the basin, but Joe often told it because he liked Reem. The valley folks were starving and Reem's shelves were empty, and just as Reem's hired man was about to take the freight wagon to Placerville for a load of supplies, a late spring storm struck the basin. The hired man refused to go, so Reem took the wagon and made it back, although when he had started, several men in Rocky Fork had offered ten to one odds he'd never get to Placerville.

To Grant that story about Reem symbolized the basin and its people. It was a tough country and it took tough folks to live in it, a fact which was beyond Linda's understanding. It was not her country. She did not understand the people and they did not understand her. She could not change herself and she could not change the basin or the people here.

It was a shame, too, because the West had need of women, strong and energetic, with wills of their own. And no one would deny that Linda Dexter was that kind of woman, but something was wrong, because she seemed out of place in the country that needed her.

CHAPTER II

Mamie Dolan's Offer



GRANT had not really considered the possibility that Linda might sell. Now it struck him like a blow from an unseen fist. If he talked an hour, he could never make her understand what the Wagon Wheel had meant to Joe Dexter, and did to himself.

There was this long period of silence, and then Linda cried, "Haven't you got anything to say, Grant, anything at all?"

"Nothing you want to hear."

She came to him and touched his arm. "Listen, Grant. I told you I did all I could to make Joe happy. Holding onto the Wagon Wheel won't make any difference to him now one way or the other."

He looked down at her pale, anxious face, a faint stirring of conscience in him. She didn't like Bruce Mayer. Perhaps that was why she had thrown herself at Grant. If she hadn't done such a complete job of throwing herself—No, it would have been the same anyhow.

"All right," he said tonelessly. "What do you want me to do?"

"I had a letter from a man named Cole Fenton. He said he'd heard Joe had died and he wanted to know if the Wagon Wheel was for sale. I wrote back and told him it was. He's coming to look at it."

"I'll break his neck," Grant said.

She shrank back as she often did when the strange streak of violence that was in him came to the surface. "He'll be on the stage today, Grant. I want you to meet him and bring him out. Please don't do or say anything that would keep him from buying the Wagon Wheel."

"How did he find out about Joe?"

"He didn't say. He just said he had made a fortune in mining, and wanted to get into the cattle business. He was in the basin several years ago and he liked it here. He made me a tentative offer of fifty thousand."

"You mean over and above the mortgage?"

She nodded. "I explained that to him."

There was a wrong smell about it, the kind of smell that a man gets when he has an unexpected meeting with a skunk. The Wagon Wheel wasn't worth fifty thousand, not with Ira Connors holding the mortgage on it that he did. Somebody had put Cole Fenton up to this; Connors maybe.

"Have you thought about what would happen if somebody got the Wagon Wheel who wasn't as square as Joe always was?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was thinking about the High Valley folks. Like Red Johnson. Some fellows might figure High Valley belonged to the Wagon Wheel. We could use it for summer range all right."

"Wouldn't make an difference," Linda said. "Joe was too easy with them. They're an outlaw pack, from all I hear."

"He knew how to handle them," Grant said. "I know there's been some talk about 'em being rustlers and bank robbers, but they've never bothered anybody in the basin."

Linda backed away, her lips tightly pressed. "I know, Grant. You're in love with that Rennie Johnson. I guess that explains a lot of things. Like the way you've treated me."

"Rennie's just a kid," he said indignantly. "Of all the damned fool notions!"

"Go ahead and deny it. It doesn't make any difference. Not really. I just want you to meet Cole Fenton and bring him out here. You show him the ranch and I'll get the best price I can. I don't care one way or the other about High Valley, Grant."

"I'll meet him," Grant said.

Picking up his Stetson from the table, he walked out, mounted his waiting horse, and rode off.

DIRECTLY north of the Wagon Wheel buildings the sandstone wall separating the basin from High Valley rose a

sheer thousand feet, dotted here and there by the dark green of tenacious cedars that somehow found precarious footing in the sandstone. A mile to the northeast Grant could see the threadlike trail that worked its way up the side of the wall. It was the only route into High Valley from the south and was seldom used except by the valley men who visited Marty Reem's store in Rocky Fork occasionally for salt or gunpowder, or any of the few items they could not produce themselves.

As Grant rode out of the Wagon Wheel yard, he remembered how often Joe Dexter had said that he could run twice the herd he did if he could use High Valley for summer range. By September, grass was belly-deep on a cow, and since none of the valley men owned more than a dozen head, most of it went to waste.

But whenever Joe had approached Red Johnson, the accepted leader of the High Valley settlers, Johnson would say no, not for any amount of money. They were getting along, they were happy, and by damn, they didn't want any Wagon Wheel cowhands getting under foot.

So Joe had let it rest, getting along with the inadequate summer range in the Big Bears which he shared with five other basin ranchers. Someone like this Cole Fenton might look upon the matter in a different light, but if someone did force the issue, Johnson and his boy, Bugeye, and their neighbors would fight.

Then, for no reason except that Linda had mentioned her, Grant thought of Rennie Johnson. Linda saying that he loved Rennie was ridiculous. The kid wasn't more than seventeen. Cute enough, Grant thought, the way a wildcat kitten was cute.

Grant had never quite understood the situation in the Johnson home. Rennie was supposed to be Red's daughter, but Grant had a notion she had been adopted. She was small-boned and fine-featured, and mild except when she was aroused, whereas Red and Bugeye were big, with coarse repellent features, and there was no mildness about them.

Grant's idea that she was an adopted daughter was based, moreover, on more than looks or manners. He had been eating dinner with the Johnsons and Joe Dexter the spring before. Rennie had been standing at the stove when Bugeye, getting up for more coffee, had patted the girl on her behind. She had promptly picked up a stick of stove wood and hit him over the head. She had almost knocked him out and Red had laughed for five minutes.

"She told you the other day to keep your paws off her," Red had said. "Now maybe you'll remember."

Afterwards it occurred to Grant that he had sensed fear in the girl. He felt sorry for her because Red never let her out of the valley, and she was always dressed in men's clothes, probably some that Bugeye had outgrown. But for Linda to say he, Grant Talbot, was in love with Rennie was just plain crazy.

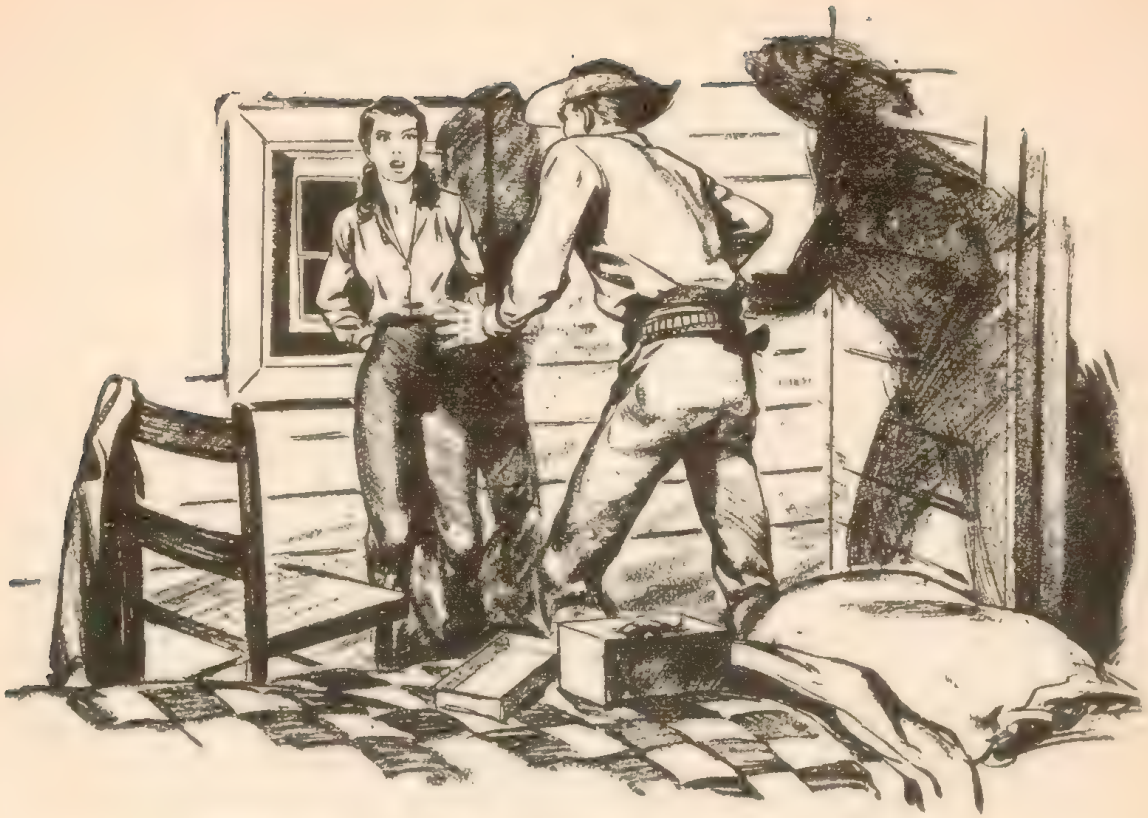
Living close to the High Valley people was a good deal like living next door to a colony of grizzlys. Joe had often expressed it in those words, and Grant agreed. The best way to get along with them was to let them alone. Besides, as Joe used to say, even grizzlys have a right to their homes.

The road had swung south to the creek, and now Grant's thoughts were turned suddenly from High Valley and its people. Ben Piper was sitting his saddle on the other side of the stream, a cigar cocked at a jaunty angle between his molars.

He called, "Mamie wants to see you, Talbot."

Grant pulled up and let his horse drink, his eyes on Piper. The man was about thirty-five, big and shaggy-haired, and his yellow eyes always seemed to be grinning at a man even when his meaty lips were without a trace of humor. He was the only rider Mamie Dolan employed. Apparently he suited her, but he was the last man in the basin Grant would have hired to ride for the Wagon Wheel.

"That's kind of funny," Grant said. "The last time I dropped in on Mamie, she showed me the business end of her scattergun."



Bugeye was a step from her, big hands reaching for her

PIPER shrugged his thick shoulders. "I don't know what's got into her. Sometimes I think she's the smartest rancher in the basin, and then there's times when she seems to have less sense than a day-old calf."

"You been waiting for me to come by?"

"Yeah," Piper said sourly. "Mamie sits up there with a pair of glasses and watches the Wagon Wheel. Hell, she can tell you what kind of underclothes the Dexter widow wears. Don't miss a washing, Mamie don't."

"She saw me leave?"

"Yep. Saw you head down the road and sent me to stop you. Well, I've got to go to town."

Piper turned downstream. Grant hesitated. He didn't trust Ben Piper, and he wasn't sure he could trust Mamie. Now the thought occurred to him that this man Fenton might have heard about Joe's death through Mamie. In any case it wouldn't hurt to find out what she wanted.

Grant rode across the creek and took the steep road leading to the bench on which the Seven Bar Seven buildings were located. He had not been here for months, and it seemed to him that the spread looked a little more run-down every time he came. Ben Piper was lazy, and Grant wondered how Mamie, who had been a tireless, hard-working woman before her accident, could put up with Piper.

He dismounted in front of Mamie's log house, calling, "Howdy, Mamie!"

Mamie Dolan had been a handsome woman, but the frustration that being bound to a wheel-chair had brought to her was beginning to show in her pale, lined face. Her hair, once a dark, lustrous brown, was thatched with gray. Now, sitting on her front porch in her chair, she held her blue eyes on Grant for a moment without speaking. He found it hard to believe that she was only thirty, but he was certain of her age because he knew

she was only three years older than he was.

"Sit down, Grant." Mamie motioned to a rawhide-bottom chair. Lifting a whisky bottle from under the blanket that was spread across her knees, she held it out to him. "Have a drink."

Grant dropped onto the chair. "No, thanks."

Mamie shoved the bottle back under the blanket. "So you won't take a drink from a woman. Well now, I'm wondering what you take from other women, like that chippy Joe left the Wagon Wheel to."

"She's no chippy, Mamie."

"Got her out of a sporting house, didn't he?"

"If you sent for me to talk about Linda—"

"Aw, don't get your fur up." Mamie produced a cigar and bit off the end. "Real touchy when it comes to what you call good women, ain't you?" She shrugged indifferently. "I want to hire you away from the Wagon Wheel. What'll it take?"

It was a morning of surprises for Grant, but the surprise he had felt when Linda had announced she was going to sell the Wagon Wheel was nothing compared to the surprise he felt now. He stared at Mamie while she fired the cigar and blew out a cloud of smoke. He wasn't sure he had heard her right. She had hated Joe Dexter for years; she hated the Wagon Wheel, and she hated Linda. Like everyone else in the valley, Mamie knew that Grant Talbot went with the Wagon Wheel.

"Damn it!" Mamie snapped. "Are you deef, or did you hear me ask you a question?"

"Yeah, I heard," Grant said, "but it didn't make sense. You don't want me."

SHE took the cigar out of her mouth, grinning a little, one hand coming up to brush back a vagrant lock of hair. "I want you all right. I want you bad enough to let you write your own ticket."

"Why?"

"You're the best cowman in the valley, that's why. Beginning in the spring, you're going to see this end of the basin chuck full of Seven Bar Seven cows. I want a ramrod, a good one, and I'll pay for him."

"You've got Piper."

Mamie snorted. "So I've got Piper. He's all right when all I've got is a shirt-tailful of cows, but he never was big enough to run a spread and he never will be." She leaned forward. "Grant, we both know the Wagon Wheel is finished, but what you don't know is that the Seven Bar Seven is moving in. I tried once before and I got knocked flat on my back. Well, I won't miss this time, not with Joe Dexter dead." She paused, watching him closely, then she asked, "Want to know the real reason I'm offering you a job?"

"You said you wanted a ramrod."

"It's more'n that. When you go to work for an outfit, you take your heart along with the rest of you. Call it loyalty if you want to. Ben Piper wouldn't even savvy if I explained it to him."

"I ain't so sure the Wagon Wheel is finished."

"I am. You know what I thought of Joe Dexter." She slapped a leg. "I hated him for that. I hated him for corraling me like he done between the creek and the south wall on a ten-cow range. Grant, there's one job I'll pull off if it's the last thing I ever do. I'll flatten the Wagon Wheel so there's nothing left of it but a memory!"

CHAPER III

A Challenge

WHILE Mamie raved Grant tried to be conciliatory.

"The Wagon Wheel is still a big outfit," he reminded.

"Hell, I got off the subject," she broke in. "I meant to say I didn't hate Joe so much that I was blind to the fact he was a big man. When a fellow like that dies, he leaves a

vacuum. I'm moving into that vacuum."

"It was Joe who died," Grant said. "Not the Wagon Wheel."

Mamie's cigar had gone cold in her hand. With a sudden violent gesture she flung it into the yard, her head thrown back, her eyes on the Wagon Wheel ranchhouse at the foot of the north wall.

"You're blind, Grant," she said. "The Wagon Wheel died when Joe died. That frothy collection of buttons and bows he married won't do anything with the spread, and you know it! She'll sell or take what she can and walk off and leave it. You're in love with a ranch, Grant, but I think you're too smart to love one that's dead."

He shook his head. "I'll stick with it till they bury it."

She brought her gaze to him, her face filled with sudden malice. "Is it that floozy who's holding you there?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. It'd take a real woman to satisfy you, and there's nothing real about her." Mamie turned her head to stare across the basin again. "There was a time when I would have done for you. You didn't know it, but I did. You couldn't see me, Grant. Too much dust in your eyes, dust that old Joe Dexter kicked up because I'd tried to lick him. But maybe I'm wrong about you, Grant. Maybe you don't want a woman. Maybe a ranch is all you need."

She was trying to tell him she had been in love with him. He couldn't believe it. It was a simple matter with Linda. She wanted a man who would give her some sense of security. But it was different with Mamie. Even crippled as she was, she was still the proudest and most independent woman he knew.

"I've got to stick with the Wagon Wheel," he said finally. "Joe done a lot for me. I drifted in here when I was a kid—"

"I know," she broke in. "Not even dry behind the ears. Just a kid with a horse and a gun and a notion he was as big as all hell. That was after Joe had settled my hash. He taught you everything you know and he made you foreman, so now you'll stick with the outfit because you're sentimental about what you owe a dead man. Forget it, Grant. Throw in with me and we'll be running this basin inside of five years. No, make it three."

"I can't, Mamie."

She shrugged, hiding her feelings behind an expressionless mask as she so often did. "I'm sorry, Grant. That redheaded hussy will sell the Wagon Wheel, and the new owner will fire you. Just remember one thing. If you don't take my offer now, you'll never have another chance."

"I'll remember." He fired a cigarette, cupping the flame with one hand, then flipped the match into the barren yard. "I'm supposed to meet a fellow in Rocky Fork named Cole Fenton who wants to buy the Wagon Wheel. Did you send for him?"

"Sure," Mamie said. "He's an old friend of mine."

He couldn't tell if she was lying, or whether she even intended for him to believe her. He said, "Thanks for the offer, Mamie," and walked to his horse and mounted.

She raised a hand in a masculine gesture of farewell. "So long, Grant. Best wishes in hell if I don't see you alive again."

"What do you mean by that?"

"When you turned me down, you asked for a lot of trouble, more trouble than any man born of woman ever had."

BELOW the Seven Bar Seven the road followed the south side of Bell Creek, a slow-moving stream that murmured faintly between the close-growing rows of willows. In the spring and early summer it was a white-maned, brawling torrent, but at this time of year it was low, and Grant was only faintly aware of its sound.

He rode past the Double O, set on the bench to the north; he passed the Horseshoe Bar to the south. Then the road swung away from the creek to make a wide turn over a ridge so that it kept an

easy grade instead of taking a steep pitch alongside a fifty-foot fall in the creek.

From the crest of the ridge Grant could count ten ranches, for at this point the basin widened. Some were so distant they were mere dots in the early fall haze. There were others he could not see, small outfits tucked out of sight in the bottoms of innumerable canyons that were ragged openings in the red sandstone cliff surrounding the basin.

Grant reined up. It was a scene at which he had gazed more times than he could count, but it always impressed him. He remembered that Joe had often stopped at this point just to look, and he had never failed to say, "Now there's a sight that'd please the eyes of the Lord." Grant didn't know about the Lord, but it pleased him and it had pleased Joe.

He could see a few dark patches of timber that knifed out into the basin floor from the bottom of the cliff, and there were willows along the creek, but generally this was open country with a fine carpet of grass. The basin had never been overgrazed, largely because Joe Dexter, knowing what had happened on other ranges, had organized the Rainbow Basin Cattlemen's Association and had been its president from the day it had been organized.

Through the association Joe had been able to control the number of cattle that were kept in the basin. Aside from Mamie Dolan, there was not a rancher in the country who had not counted Joe as a friend.

It had been nearly ten years since Grant had ridden into the Wagon Wheel and asked for a job, and during that time there had been no real trouble in the basin.

Grant had never heard the whole story of the trouble between Joe and Mamie. It was something Joe had refused to talk about, and Grant had never been inclined to ask Mamie about it. But he knew there had been at least one man killed, and that all of Mamie's crew except Ben Piper had left the Seven Bar Seven. Grant could not be sure, but he had a notion that Joe could have run Mamie out of the basin if he'd wanted to.

It would have been better, Grant thought, as he rode on toward town, if Joe had made Mamie leave the country. She had refused to join the association, she had seldom left the Seven Bar Seven, and although she had been young and attractive when she'd had the fight with the Wagon Wheel, she had lost all interest in social gatherings after her defeat and had even quit going to dances. She had become bitter and vindictive, and now she promised trouble.

It didn't make any sense, doing nothing for ten years and then, after Joe was killed, starting to talk about moving into the vacuum that Joe's death had brought about. Or maybe it did make sense. She had been afraid of Joe, but she had never forgotten her old dream. The more Grant thought about it, the more it worried him, because he didn't see what she could do. But he did not doubt that she was up to something. Idle talk was not one of her failings.

It was not yet noon when Grant reached Rocky Fork and stabled his horse. The stage was due at one. He loitered for a moment in front of the stable and rolled a smoke, a lanky figure in the bright sunlight. It was warm now and the wind had died.

A THOUGHT occurred to Grant as he glanced along the deserted street. Maybe Linda would like it here in town where she could see other people and visit with them. It was possible that she could buy a small house. Usually the Wagon Wheel showed a sizable profit. There would be enough left this fall after the herd was sold to give her a good living in town for a year, if it wasn't for the money that had to go to Ira Connors.

Grant crossed the dust strip to the bank, the only brick building on Main Street. Marty Reem and Sheriff Steve Ollard were talking to Connors when Grant came in. They said, "Howdy" and he spoke to them, and then there was a moment of awkward silence.

It had been different when Joe was alive. If Joe had come in instead of Grant, Connors would have looked up and they would have gone across the street to the Silver Dollar and had a drink. But today no one suggested it, and Grant knew how it was. He was young and they were old. Now, looking at Grant, they felt their age and they resented his youth.

"Got your herd gathered?" Connors asked, after a moment of silence.

"No." Grant poked his thumbs under his belt, an impulsive idea gripping his mind. "Suppose we don't meet that loan next month, Ira?"

Connors was a thin, pale-faced man who had stomach trouble. Now he bent forward, a hand on his middle, looking pained as if Grant's question had started his stomach hurting. He said in a low tone, "That's a hell of a question, Grant. Nothing to keep you from raising the money, is there?"

"Maybe we've got other use for the *dinero*."

"Like what?"

"Like buying a town house for Linda."

The pained look on Connors' face deepened. Steve Ollard laughed and slapped his leg. He was a big man with a sweeping white mustache of which he was inordinately proud, and he had grown lazy and a little fat with the peace that the basin had enjoyed for ten years. He winked at Marty Reem, saying, "That'd be a hell of a good investment for the Wagon Wheel, wouldn't it, Marty?"

But Marty Reem saw nothing funny in it. He was a bald, pudgy man, mild-mannered and polite, and he possessed the sharpest and most penetrating mind of the three of them. He said, "Something's biting you, Grant. Let's have it."

Ollard sobered, looking as if he regretted having laughed, and Connors straightened up, green eyes searching Grant's face.

Grant said, "You were all Joe's friends. I was a little more than that. He was the nearest thing to a father I can remember. Now that he's dead, I savvy what a hell of a big man he was."

"We know that," Ollard said, impatient now.

"Shut up," Reem said softly. "Something's happened. Let him talk."

"Big or not," Grant went on, "Joe had his faults. "He was soft when it came to women. Or maybe he just didn't understand them."

"Never figured out he was getting old," Ollard said with deep malice.

Ollard had a young wife, and Joe used to hint slyly that she was too much for him. Apparently Joe had overlooked the fact that he had put himself in Ollard's position when he married Linda. Grant pinned his gaze on the sheriff, suddenly realizing that he disliked the man. He wondered if these three were as good friends as they let on.

"I didn't mean it that way," Grant said. "He should have run Mamie Dolan out of the country a long time ago, and he should have fixed Linda up with a town house where she could see other women and gab over the back fence. She's lonesome."

Ollard grinned. "You're out there."

Reem said softly, "That's enough, Steve. You're taking a long time to get at this, Grant."

"I know," Grant said. "I keep asking myself a question and I'm afraid of the answer. You see, I'm wondering if you three are big enough to hold the lid on when the blow-up comes, now that Joe ain't around."

Red-faced, Ollard sputtered, "What's the matter with you, Grant? You're as ringy as hell today."

"I'm just asking," Grant asked.

"And I'll give you a damned quick answer," Ollard snapped. "I'll keep the lid on if a blow-up comes, and I'll do it alone."

"You ain't man enough," Marty Reem said wearily. "Me and Ira ain't neither. No use trying to fool ourselves, Steve. We all leaned on Joe. The Wagon Wheel has always stood for something in this basin because Joe threw a big shadow. Now the shadow ain't here."

CHAPTER IV

High Grade, Low Grade

REEM was scratching his bald head, eyes on Grant, acting as if Ollard didn't exist.

He said, "We've got trouble, Grant. That it?"

"Linda's figuring on selling the Wagon Wheel to a gent named Cole Fenton," Grant said. "He's coming in on the stage. Did you send for him, Ira?"

"No," Connors said. "I'm satisfied the way things are."

Grant nodded, believing the banker. "Looks like somebody wrote to Fenton about Joe dying. I'm wondering who it was."

"Not me," Ollard said. "Suppose she does sell. That won't make no never-mind to any of us except you. This Fenton jasper might fire you."

Grant nodded. "I figure he will, and I don't like it. Joe would have wanted me to stay on the Wagon Wheel, and as long as Linda has it, I will. I was thinking that if she had a town house, she might be satisfied."

"You'll pay the bank when the loan's due," Connors said. "Business is business."

"It is with you," Grant said heavily. "There's one more thing. Mamie offered me a job on the Seven Bar Seven. She says the Wagon Wheel is done, and she's moving in on our range."

Ollard snorted derisively. "You've got no reason to worry about her. She's broke and she's crippled. What the hell could she do?"

"She may be crippled," Reem said slowly, "but I don't figure she's broke. I've wondered about that for years. She don't buy anything to speak of at the store, and every fall she's had a few steers to sell. I'm guessing she's saved her money."

"Why?" Ollard demanded.

"She'll be hiring gunslingers," Reem said. "But you'll hold the lid on even if she brings in an army, won't you, Steve?"

Ollard jammed his big hands deeply into his pants' pockets. "Sure," he said. "Sure, I'll hold it on."

"It don't make any difference to us," Connors said thoughtfully. "With Joe gone the Wagon Wheel is just another ranch."

"Not to me," Grant said.

He looked at the banker, and then at Ollard, making no effort to hide his dislike for them both. They were tough enough in their own way, but it was a small way, and now he thought they had never been Joe's friends. Not real friends. He had overshadowed them completely, and Grant sensed that they had resented it more than they had let it appear.

"If Linda's going to sell" Connors said, "nobody can stop her."

"I aim to," Grant said, "and not just because I want to save my job. If she sells, I've got a hunch you'll be combing Red Johnson and the rest of the High Valley bunch out of your hair."

Wheeling, Grant stalked out of the bank, knowing that he would say too much if he stayed. He stopped when he reached the board walk, for Marty Reem called:

"Wait, Grant!"

The storekeeper had run to catch up with him, and now he puffed a little, stopping beside Grant and looking up at his lean, dark face.

"You thinking like them other two?" Grant asked.

"No," Reem answered. "Ollard don't never think of anything but women, and Ira thinks only of dollars. I know how you feel."

"I wonder," Grant said.

Reem rubbed his bald head, eyes sweeping the street. "Even this little old town don't seem the same with Joe gone. When he was alive, his ranch was a sort of balance wheel in the basin. He had a way of putting a little pressure here and some there, and everything rolled along peaceful-like. Given a little time, you could do the same. Mamie knows that, or she wouldn't have tried to hire you."

GRANT waited, knowing Reem had more to say. The things Reem had just said had been in his mind, things that neither Connors nor Ollard would admit.

"I know how you feel, I tell you," Reem went on, "but it ain't something you can put into words. You and the Wagon Wheel belong together. We'll stop Linda from selling, some way. Got anything saved?"

"Not much."

"Nothing to do now but stall Linda." He rubbed his bald head some more, eyes thoughtful. "This house in town idea might work. Tell her she can rent mine. I'll move into the back of the store."

"I'll tell her," Grant said. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me," Reem said. "It's for all our good, which Ira and Steve ain't got sense enough to see. Once the ball starts, there'll be a hell of a lot of grabbing for Wagon Wheel range. Mamie won't be the only one."

"Stage is coming," Grant said. "I'm supposed to meet Fenton."

"Go ahead and meet him," Reem said. "One more thing. I know what you meant about the High Valley bunch. Go see Red Johnson. Maybe you can get Rennie to stay with Linda. It'd give Linda somebody to talk to."

It wouldn't work, Linda feeling about Rennie as she did, but Grant didn't tell Reem that. He said, "Might be a good notion," and moved down the street to the hotel where the stage would stop.

The instant Grant laid eyes on Cole Fenton he knew he would not like the man, although the knowledge was tempered by the realization that he was prejudiced. Fenton was the only passenger, a medium tall, florid-faced man with a small, neatly trimmed mustache, the kind a vain man would wear. He was about forty, Grant judged, with dark eyes and black hair that needed trimming.

Grant held out his hand as Fenton stepped down from the stage. He said, "I'm Talbot, the Wagon Wheel foreman. Mrs. Dexter asked me to meet you."

A quick smile touched Fenton's lips. "That's fine, Talbot. I appreciate the courtesy."

Fenton gave Grant's hand a quick grasp and turned to the coach to wait for his luggage. Grant said, "If you're hungry, we can go put the feed bag on. The driver'll leave your bags in the hotel lobby."

"Good idea," Fenton said. "Been hungry for an hour."

"Leave the valises in the lobby, Butch," Grant called.

The driver nodded. "Sure thing, Grant."

They walked across the lobby into the dining room, took a table near the door, and now Grant saw that the man wore his hair long, that it was not a case of needing a trim. Fenton was wearing a brown broadcloth suit and a flowered waistcoat. There was a heavy gold chain across his chest from which dangled an elk tooth charm. A dude Grant thought, the last man in the world that anyone would expect to go into the cattle business.

"Mrs. Dexter said you'd made some *dinero* in mining," Grant said.

"That's right," Fenton said. "Cripple Creek. I'm not a miner, you understand. I bought and sold claims, and I've been lucky. Funny thing about mining. It's not what you'd call a solid business. You can drop a fortune down a shaft in about five minutes. A dozen things can go wrong. It's not that way with cattle, is it, Talbot?"

"Not if you run a spread right, although a bad winter can break you." Grant rolled a smoke and sealed it. "I believe she said you'd been in the basin before."

"Several years ago. I met Joe Dexter. At the time I understood he was a big man hereabouts."

"The biggest. How'd you hear of his death?"

"Saw it in the papers."

IT WAS a quick answer, a little too quick, Grant thought. He pondered this a moment, thinking there must be some way to discourage Fenton, and knowing that he would have no scruples about doing exactly that regardless of how Linda felt. Their steaks came then and

they ate in silence.

Later, when they had finished their pies, Fenton said, "I'm a greenhorn, Talbot. I'll need a crew. I mean men I can trust who know their business. I assume you'll stay on?"

"Maybe," Grant said. "I was offered another job today by Mamie Dolan."

Fenton's brows lifted. "Mamie Dolan? Does she own a spread in the basin?"

"The Seven Bar Seven across the creek from the Wagon Wheel. She said she knew you."

Fenton laughed shortly. "She's got the best of me." He rose. "Bring a rig in from the ranch?"

"No. I'll get a livery horse for you."

Frowning, Fenton put on his derby. "I have several valises. I don't believe I can handle them on a horse."

"I figured you'd be staying at the hotel. I didn't know—"

Temper showed on Fenton's face. "Look, Talbot. If I buy this ranch, it will be a big transaction. I don't aim just to take a look at the buildings and sign the papers. I'll live out there and see what kind of an outfit it is, or no deal."

"I'll get a livery rig," Grant said.

"I'll be in the saloon," Fenton said. "Give me a holler when you're ready."

He would be right at home with his belly up against the bar, Grant thought. He said, "I'm looking out for Mrs. Dexter. The Wagon Wheel is all she's got. Naturally I'd like to know if you're in a position to swing this deal. She said you were offering fifty thousand."

"A tentative offer, my friend." Fenton shoved his hands into his pants' pockets. "Are you questioning my ability to raise fifty thousand?"

He was close to blowing up. Anger showed in his red-flecked eyes, in the tight set of his mouth.

Grant said, "It ain't a proposition of questioning. Just strikes me that it'd be fair if you had the money on deposit here so when you make up your mind—"

"When I make up my mind, I'll have it on deposit," Fenton said, and strode out of the hotel.

Staring at his back, Grant thought, "I'd play hell working for a man like that."

It took a few minutes to get a buckboard from the stable, tie his buckskin behind it, and load Fenton's valises into the bed, a moment in which a nagging sense of irritation grew in Grant. Fenton was loading up on whisky while Grant did the work. If he hadn't clung to a small hope that he could say something that would sour Fenton on his proposed deal, he would have ridden out of town and let the dude wait on himself.

Grant tied in front of the Silver Dollar and went in. Fenton and Ben Piper were bellied up against the bar at the far end, talking amiably as if they were old friends. They were the only ones in the saloon except for the apron and a puncher from the Box B in Shadow Canyon. Nodding at the Box B man Grant went along the bar to where Fenton and Piper stood, their heads close together.

"Old friends?" Grant asked.

Fenton wheeled, startled. "Hell, no. I just don't like to drink alone."

Piper stepped away from the bar, lurching a little as if he were too drunk to stand up. He said thickly, "I reckon you're quitting the Wagon Wheel. Reckon you're going to work for Mamie."

"I didn't take the job," Grant said.

PIPER took a step toward him, his big hands fisted. Whisky always made him proddy, and he'd had enough to make him hunt for an excuse to fight. He said, "So you're too damned good to ride for Mamie! I'll tell you something, sonny. She's a better man than old Dexter ever was."

"Ready to travel, Fenton?" Grant asked.

"No hurry." Fenton fixed amused eyes on Grant's face. "Looks like this cowboy ain't done talking to you, Talbot."

"You're damned right I ain't!" Piper shouted. "Got a lot to say. A hell of a lot. Old Dexter thought he was God. Ran everything in the basin, Dexter did. Now Talbot here thinks he's big enough to wear Dexter's boots. Even sleeps in the same bed with Dexter's—"

"Shut up," Grant said sharply. "If you wasn't drunk, I'd beat hell out of you."

Piper laughed. "Hitting pretty close, ain't I? Hitting right where the hair's short."

"You're a liar!" Grant said. "Come on, Fenton."

"You know, Talbot," Fenton said as if the thought pleased him, "strikes me you're afraid of this man."

"Sure he is." Piper reared back, meaty lips pulled away from brown teeth. "I ain't no liar, Talbot, and I don't cotton to being called one!"

CHAPTER V

Trouble in the Silver Dollar

PIPER drove at Grant, a big fist swinging for the face, and in that instant Grant realized that the man was not drunk. He had wanted a fight and had set himself to provoke one. Grant sidestepped Piper's rush, catching him on the side of the head with a punishing right. Piper grunted and, swinging sharply, nailed Grant on the point of the chin with a sledge-hammer left.

Grant was knocked off his feet. He never fought well unless he was angry or hurt, and he had not been angered by what Talbot had said because he had thought the man was drunk. He rolled to escape a swinging boot that Piper aimed for his ribs and came to his feet. He was both angry and hurt now, and convinced that this had been rigged, that for some reason Fenton wanted him licked.

Grant waded in, rolling his head as Piper landed a right, then he was close and he hit the Seven Bar Seven man with a short, punishing blow that made him give ground. Grant caught him in the stomach, a driving blow that jolted wind out of him; he nailed him on the mouth and cut a lip, and hit him on the nose. Piper, crazed by pain, left himself wide open and grabbed Grant around the middle. Grant hit him with a downswinging right on the side of the head. The blow knocked him loose and Grant stepped back.

Pipe fell flat on his belly. He lay there a moment, apparently half-stunned, then he raised himself to his hands and knees and shook his head. He came on up to his feet and lunged at Grant, a knife in his right hand.

The barkeep yelled. The puncher from Shadow Canyon bawled, "Put that up, Piper!" There was no time for Grant to pull his gun, no time for anything except to jump clear as the six-inch blade slashed at him in a sweeping blow that would have disemboweled him if it had connected. Then Piper fell flat on his face again and it took a moment for Grant to realize that Fenton had tripped him.

The barman came running from behind the mahogany, a sawed-off shotgun in his hand.

"Damn you, Piper!" he yelled. "Drop that knife or I'll blow your head off!"

Piper tossed the knife behind him and wiped a hand across his bloody face. This time he was slow in getting up, so slow that he seemed almost out on his feet. Grant moved in fast, bringing a right through that snapped Piper's head back. Piper went down again, and this time he lay motionless.

"That snaky, no-good son!" the barman barked angrily. "I've worked here for three years and I've seen more fights than I can count, but this is the first time I ever saw a knife pulled."

"Must have been out of his head," Fenton said. "Or too drunk to know what he was doing."

Grant looked at Fenton. He said, "You wanted this fight. Why?"

Fenton stared at him as if this were beyond his comprehension. "You're loco. I just came in here for a drink. Why would I want a fight between two men I'd never seen until today?"

"I don't know," Grant said, and drew his gun. "I wish I did."

"I don't take that kindly," Fenton shouted in an outraged tone. "I figure I saved your hide tripping this fellow, and then you claim I wanted a fight. Hell, I should have let him cut you to pieces!"

The barman said, "Grant, put that iron away. If you're aiming to kick up a smoke ruckus, get outside."

Piper was sitting up, his eyes glassy. Grant cocked his gun. He said, "Piper, did you ever see this man before?"

"Put that iron up, Grant!" the barman shouted.

"How about it, Piper?" Grant asked, ignoring the barkeep.

Piper stared at the gun in Grant's hand. He got up and staggered to the bar. He poured a drink and gulped it, then he looked at Grant. "No, never saw him before."

GRANT holstered his gun and, wheeling, stalked out of the saloon. He realized it had been a fool play, for he should have known that Piper would not admit anything. He was untying his buckskin from the back of the buckboard when Fenton came out of the saloon.

"What are you doing?" Fenton demanded.

"Riding home," Grant said. "You can do what you damned please."

"You're going off half-cocked," Fenton said. "I had nothing to do with Piper jumping you. I don't know how to get out to the Wagon Wheel. It's up to you to take me."

Grant hesitated, the violence of his fury dying, but he was still obsessed by the suspicion that there had been something between Fenton and Piper. It would do no good, he thought, to leave Fenton stranded, and it might destroy any faith that Linda had in him if he showed up at the Wagon Wheel without the man.

He said, "All right. Get in." He tied his buckskin again to the back of the buckboard.

"Looks like a hell of a country," Fenton said in a complaining voice as he stepped into the buckboard. "And I thought Cripple Creek was wild."

Grant was silent until they were out of town. Then he said, "I don't get it, Fenton. I don't get it at all. This morning Mamie said she knew you, but you claim you don't know her. Then you go into the Silver Dollar and get chummy with Mamie's man. When I show up, he starts a fight. Don't try telling me he was drunk. I know better."

"I don't get it, either," Fenton said blandly. "Look, Talbot, if I buy the Wagon Wheel, I want you to run the outfit. You must be a good foreman, or Dexter wouldn't have given you the job. Is it a deal?"

"No," Grant said. "I don't want Mrs. Dexter to sell, and I'm thinking she'll change her mind."

"Not for fifty thousand," Fenton said. "We've corresponded for a couple of months now. I take it she don't like the country and she's anxious to sell. I should think you'd want to keep your job. If it's a matter of wages—"

Grant shook his head. "Let's put it another way. Fifty thousand is too much for the Wagon Wheel. What's more, you're going to have trouble with Mamie. She told me this morning she was going to flatten Wagon Wheel out till it wasn't nothing but a memory."

"Forget it," Fenton said. "I never ran into a woman I couldn't handle. As for the price, why, if I like the ranch, I don't mind paying more'n it's worth." He drew a cigar from his pocket and lighted it. "Have you got a good crew?"

Grant was silent a moment. It was a good crew with the exception of Bruce Mayer. The man was a tophand, but Grant had felt an instinctive dislike for him from the first. He would have fired Mayer weeks ago if Linda had let him. The rest of the crew had been with the Wagon Wheel a long time, but he had no way of knowing whether they would stay under a new owner.

"Yeah," Grant said finally. "It's a good crew."

"Then we'll keep them," Fenton said. "We'll go right on running the Wagon Wheel the way Joe Dexter did. I try to

get along with my neighbors, so I see no reason why this Mamie you talk about should make trouble for us."

Grant said nothing. When they reached the falls they swung away from the creek, climbing steadily, and at the ridge top, Fenton pointed to the north wall of the basin.

"What's up yonder?" Fenton asked. "I mean, on the other side?"

"High Valley."

FENTON pulled on his cigar a moment, eyes on the cliff. "As I remember it when I was here before, there's a shortage of summer range. That right?"

Grant nodded. "Too many of us using the Big Bears."

"Anyone live in High Valley?"

"A few families. They run a shirttailful of cows."

"Kind of a tough outfit, aren't they? Seems to me I heard something like that."

"Good people to let alone," Grant said.

"But the Wagon Wheel could use that valley, and Dexter never went after it. I'm wondering why."

"He got along with his neighbors," Grant said.

"Hell, if the grass in High Valley is going to waste and we need it, it just ain't smart to pass it up."

"It's smarter to pass it up than to go after it. Them hombres up there don't want nobody bothering 'em."

"Take me up there tomorrow," Fenton said, "and I'll talk to them. I'll pay 'em, if that would do any good."

"It wouldn't," Grant said. "They just want to be let alone."

Fenton grinned. "Sounds like the old yarn about the dog in the manger. Only thing to do in a case like that is to kick the dog out of the manger."

If there had been any doubt in Grant's mind about working for Fenton, there was none now. Fenton would be looking for a new foreman the instant he closed the deal with Linda.

Grant looked up at the north wall, thinking of the Johnsons and Gib Lane and the others who had lived there for a long time. Through all those years there had never been any trouble with the High Valley folks, largely because Joe Dexter had insisted that the basin ranchers leave them alone. Now Fenton was talking about kicking them out, talking as coolly as if they had no rights at all.

For a time Grant's mind lingered on Rennie, and he thought, "I've got to get up there tonight. . . ."

Up in High Valley it was nearly dark when Rennie Johnson returned to the cabin, a string of trout in one hand, her fish pole in the other. She had hurried along the creek, not knowing whether Red and Bugeye were back or not. If they were, she'd get a tongue lashing from Red for not having supper ready.

A sense of injustice grew in her. She never knew when they would be home. They were gone every day when the weather was good, fishing or hunting or playing poker in Gib Lane's cabin down the creek. They were typical of the High Valley men—lazy and careless and expecting to be waited on by their womenfolks.

Like the other valley women, Rennie was little better than a slave. It was a situation she had accepted when she had been younger, but now she was nearly eighteen, and with the years a feeling of rebellion had grown in her until she knew she could not stay here any longer.

Relief swept through her when she saw that there was no light in the cabin. Red and Bugeye might not be back for hours. Possibly for days. They never told her where they were going or when they'd be back, but they expected her to be here when they did return.

Rennie laid the trout on the table and lighted a lamp, her eyes sweeping the kitchen. It was a barren room as all the rooms in the cabin were—a home-made pine table, two benches, the range, and some shelves along the wall that held a few pans and dishes and the supplies that were left from the last trip Red had made to Rocky Fork. That was all.

She was a small-boned girl with fine features and dark brown eyes in a tanned face. Her hair was jet-black, hold-

ing a bright sheen from the lamplight. She raised her hands to it, tightening the pins that held it, a feeling of discontent growing in her.

She would leave right now if she had any place to go, but this was the only world she knew. It had been her home since she had been a child, but she had some remembrance of another, distant place, a ranch where she had been born and had lived her first few years. She seldom prodded her mind about it, for it was vague to her and shadowed by nightmare memories she wanted to lose.

Now she wondered about the outside as she did every idle moment. She could leave the valley and go down into the basin, but she had no idea what she would do then. She had never been to Rocky Fork. She had no money, no friends except Grant Talbot, and the only clothes she had were Bugeye's shirt and trousers that she had cut down so she could wear them.

CHAPTER VI

In High Valley

THE sound of a horse coming downstream over the rocky trail reached Rennie Johnson. She whirled to the range and started a fire. She made biscuits, working frantically because she knew what Red would say when he came in.

The feeling that she was trapped brought her close to panic. This was no way to live. She had to do something! She had told herself that over and over. She would not stay here, growing old and dowdy and beaten as the other women were, marrying Bugeye as Red had told her she would have to do.

The horse had stopped in front of the cabin. She wondered about that as she slid the pan of biscuits into the oven and filled the fire-box with pine. If it were Red or Bugeye, either put his horse in the corral and come tramping into the kitchen. Bugeye, always demanding, would bawl, "What the hell you been doing all day? I'm hungry."

For a moment fear touched her. It was someone else. Maybe Gib Lane, who sent a chill down her spine every time his lecherous eyes were on her. She was afraid of Bugeye who let her alone only because Red made him, but she was far more afraid of Lane who was a bachelor and had a strange, slinky way of moving that reminded her of the slithering passage of a snake.

She picked up a knife from a shelf and laid it on the back of the stove so it would be handy. She stood motionless, her slim body rigid, eyes on the open door. Then she knew it wasn't Gib Lane, for a man called, "Hello, the house!" Relief was a weakness in her when she recognized the voice. It was Grant Talbot!

Rennie stepped to the door. "Come in!" she shouted.

Saddle leather squeaked as Grant swung down, and a moment later he stepped into the finger of light that fell past her. He asked, "Red here?"

"No." For a moment she was afraid he was going to turn and walk back to his horse, and she added quickly, "Come in, Grant. He'll be along."

She moved back to the stove. He followed her, reluctantly she thought, as if he wasn't sure this was what he should do. She looked at him, his bronzed face with its gray eyes and long mouth and square chin. Her eyes moved down his lanky body, a little slack as if he were very tired, and she thought how different he was from the valley men she knew.

There was none of the animal furtiveness about him that characterized Red and Bugeye and Gib Lane. It was not a definite thing she could put her finger on, but she always had a feeling that he was not afraid of anything, for the simple reason he had done nothing he was ashamed of.

"I was getting supper," Rennie said. "Sit down."

"Don't fix nothing for me," Grant said. "I ate before I left the Wagon Wheel." He motioned to the trout on the table. "Looks like you had luck."

"They were biting tonight," she said. "I'll fry some for you. I've got biscuits in the oven."

He shook his head. "I ain't hungry." He sat down on a bench and rolled a smoke. "Got any idea when Red will be back?"

She hesitated, not wanting him to go, and yet knowing she had to be honest with him. She could lie to Red or Bugeye because they lied to her, but it was different with Grant.

She said, "No. They left this morning. I don't even know where they went."

SHE dribbled Arbuckle's coffee into the pot and, filling it with water, set it on the front of the stove. She turned to him, thinking that this was one of the few times she had ever had a chance to talk to him alone. She was silent for a moment while he fired his cigarette, then she walked to the table and sat down across from him, her small hands fisted.

"Grant," she said in a low tone, "take me away from here."

He frowned at her, surprised. "Why?"

"I just can't stay here. That's why. You know what it's like. You know Red and Bugeye. I never get to go anywhere. I don't even have any decent clothes. I'd have left a long time ago if I had any place to go."

"Red wouldn't like it."

"Of course he wouldn't," she cried. "Does that make any difference?"

He pulled at his cigarette, staring at her as if he didn't see her. He was not a man, she thought, who worried about things, but he was worried now. Irritation stirred in her. He acted as if he hadn't heard what she said.

"Grant, I told you I've got to get out of the valley. Red says that I've got to marry Bugeye. I'd kill myself first. I—I'd kill him if I had to!"

Still frowning, he said, "I thought you were supposed to be his sister."

She laughed. She was so surprised at the high, strained sound that was so unnatural, and then she was aware that her fingernails were biting into the palms of her hands.

"I'm not related to them. I'm just a maverick. I don't know who I am, but I do know there's a better way to live than this. There must be."

"Reckon there is," he agreed. "I never figured this deal out. Red always acted like there wasn't any other place he

The Death of Iron Jacket

HIS name was Phebits Quasho (Iron Jacket) and he was correctly named. The fierce old chieftain of the Quehada Comanches died bravely in battle with a band of Texas Rangers and Tonkawa Indian Scouts at a fight on the Rio Negro on May 12, 1858, while wearing his famed coat of Spanish mail.

At last the ancient armor had betrayed him, yet it was sheer luck that turned the trick. The bullet that penetrated the mail-coat had struck exactly at a joint between two links; otherwise the centuries-old metal would have stopped or deflected the bullet as it had done so many times in the past. Dents on the metal proved that the jacket had saved the chief's life a dozen times in former battles. Designed and hand-forged more than three hundred years before to protect some soldier of De Soto or Coronado, the burnished mail-coat finished up its war-like usefulness guarding the vitals of one of the hated *Indios*—and failed him too at the very last, as it had failed some proud soldier of Castile long ago.

—*Norman B. Wiltsey*

wanted to go to."

"He's satisfied. Don't ask me why. Don't even ask me where they go when they ride away and leave me alone for two weeks at a time. When they get back, their horses are tired and they're all in. They always have money until they play a game of poker with Gib Lane. Then he gets it."

She saw a sudden interest come into his eyes. "You're saying they knock a bank over? Or rob a stage?"

"That must be it. They're safe here. Steve Ollard never bothers them. Why would they stay in a place like this unless it was a hideout where they'll be perfectly safe?"

"I've wondered about it." He tapped his fingers on the table, the frown still lining his forehead. "What would Red do if you left?"

"I don't think he'd do anything. He'd be awful mad, but he'd probably take it out on Bugeye. I'm just somebody to cook for them."

He rose and, walking to the stove, dropped his cigarette into it. He came back, moving slowly. "Rennie, I can't take you. Not now. We may have trouble the way things are stacking up, and if I took you, we'd have it sure. Anyhow, it ain't none of my business."

"What kind of trouble are you looking for?"

"Linda aims to sell the Wagon Wheel. A gent named Cole Fenton is here to buy it. He thinks he wants High Valley if he makes the deal."

"There'd be hell to pay then," she said.

Grant nodded. "I know. That's why I came up. I wanted to tell Red. I figured that if we could stall things for a while, Fenton might decide he didn't want to buy the Wagon Wheel."

"You don't want the ranch sold. That it?"

"That's it. Right now we need time. Linda might be satisfied if she could live in town. I don't know. Anyhow, I wanted to stave off trouble. Joe made the Wagon Wheel mean something in the basin. I'd like to keep it that way."

SHE understood how that was. Red had always liked Grant, but he wouldn't if he worked for this Fenton and Fenton tried to shove cattle into High Valley.

"There won't be any trouble this fall," she said. "Fenton wouldn't put cattle up here till next summer."

"I don't know. Something about this deal don't add up right. Anyhow, I can't do anything for you. That's between you and Red, but I'll talk to him when he comes in. Maybe I could give you a job on the Wagon Wheel."

"Anything!" she whispered eagerly. "I'd do anything to get out of High Valley."

He rose. "I'll be sloping along."

She jumped up and came around the table to him, suddenly panicky with the realization that nothing had been settled and that Grant Talbot was the only one who could help her. She gripped his arms with frantic urgency.

"Take me with you tonight while they're gone! Please, Grant! You can talk to Red about it later."

"I told you I couldn't," he said roughly. "I'd just be kicking the lid off a pot of trouble, and that's the very thing I'm trying to keep from doing."

"Don't leave me here, Grant!" She was almost hysterical now. "Red doesn't care anything about me. He won't tell me who my folks were. Said the Indians killed them and he raised me."

"But he's taken care of you," Grant said. "No reason for you getting boogery now."

"Yes, there is. I told you he's going to make me marry Bugeye. I won't! I just won't!"

He pulled her arm down from his neck. He said softly, "Rennie, you're all worked up tonight. Nobody can make you marry a man you don't want to, not even in High Valley."

"You don't know Red. He's no good, Grant. None of them are. Bugeye and Gib Lane and all of them."

"Talbot!"

It was Bugeye standing in the doorway, a gangling man with a wide, bat nose and

protruding green eyes that gave him his name. He stood with his long legs spread, one hand on gun butt, his face ugly with jealous rage.

Rennie whirled from Grant and ran to. the stove. "I'll get supper right away!" she cried, and took the biscuits out of the oven. She didn't know how long Bugeye had stood there or how much he had heard, but she knew he went crazy when any other man even glanced at her.

Bugeye acted as if he hadn't heard. He started walking toward Grant, each step slow and deliberate. He said, "I've been wondering why you came up here. It was Rennie all the time. Now I'm going to show you that sweet-talking to her don't pay. I'll fix your mug so you won't be so damned purty."

"I came up here to see Red," Grant said. "Where is he?"

"You're a damned liar!" Bugeye shouted. "You was sneaking around to see Rennie when we was gone."

"No, Bugeye!" Rennie screamed. "Stop it! You hear?"

But there was no stopping Bugeye. He kept on, moving in that slow, deliberate way, his insane eyes fixed on Grant's face. Rennie grabbed the knife and jumped at Bugeye. Grant shouted, "Look out!" Bugeye wheeled and ducked aside, cursing her. She stumbled and fell, and Bugeye kicked her in the ribs.

"You damned little floozy," Bugeye said. "We leave you alone and this—"

GRANT was on him then, hitting him in the face with a swinging right that swiveled his head on his shoulders and sent him spinning half the width of the room. Bugeye had no chance to regain his balance.

Grant went after him, his face hard set with anger. He ducked a blow that Bugeye swung instinctively; he brought his right through again, a powerful, turning fist that caught young Johnson on the jaw and knocked him against the wall. Bugeye's feet went out from under him and he sat down, his eyes glassy.

Rennie was up now, the knife in her hand. She screamed, "Kill him, Grant, kill him!"

Grant moved back and drew his gun. He said, "I don't like a yahoo who calls me a liar, and I like him a hell of a lot less when he kicks a woman. If you want real trouble, get up and pull your iron."

"I reckon there's no need for that," Red called from the doorway. "You handle your fists real well, Grant."

"He kicked me, Red!" Rennie cried. "Bugeye kicked me!"

"I didn't get here in time to see the beginning of the fracas," Red said, "but maybe Bugeye had reason to kick you. What are you doing with that knife?"

"He was going after Grant," Rennie cried, "and he didn't have any reason to kick me. I was trying to stop him. You don't want to make an enemy out of the only friend you've got in the basin, do you, Red?"

CHAPTER VII

Nightmare Memories

FOR a moment Red gave Rennie no answer. He stood with a slack shoulder against the door jamb, a big, heavy-boned man, his pale eyes fixed speculatively on Grant. He rubbed a stubble-covered cheek, jaws moving rhythmically on his chew of tobacco.

"No, not if he is a friend," Red said finally. And to Bugeye, "Get up, kid. You ain't hurt."

Bugeye rose, feeling of his jaw where Grant had hit him. He said in a low tone, "I'll kill you, Talbot. I'm going to kill you."

"Shut up," Red said. "You talk too much. Now what was this all about?"

"I came up here to see you," Grant said, "and this pup of yours got it into his head I came to see Rennie."

"He was honeying up to her!" Bugeye shouted. "I saw 'em. She had her arms around his neck. I saw 'em, I tell you!"

Red nodded at Rennie. "How about it?"

She lowered her eyes. "I was trying to get him to do something for me."

"Do what?"

Rennie raised her eyes and glared defiantly at Red. "I wanted him to take me away. I won't waste my life rotting up here in this damned old valley."

"He wouldn't do it?" When Rennie shook her head, Red added, "Well, now, maybe he is my friend. What'd you want to see me about, Grant?"

Grant told him about Linda wanting to sell the Wagon Wheel and about Fenton saying he'd run cattle in High Valley if he bought the outfit. Then he added, "I didn't want you going off half-cocked, Red. We've always got along, and I didn't see no reason for trouble over this."

"Well, sir," Red said, "you'll have trouble the minute I see a Wagon Wheel critter in the valley. You can tell Fenton that."

"He wants to see you. Maybe tomorrow. I came up to tell you first."

"That's real smart," Red said. "Real smart. All right, Grant. I'll be around in the morning. Fetch your man up here and I'll show him what he's up against."

For a moment Grant hesitated, looking at Rennie's pale face and then at Bugeye's sullen one. He brought his eyes back to Red.

"Mamie Dolan's making war talk. Can I figure on help from you if I need it?"

"So the Wagon Wheel is going to need help from High Valley!" Red roared a laugh. "It's downright comical, you talking about needing help. When Joe was alive, the Wagon Wheel never asked for help from nobody."

"I ain't asking for it," Grant said angrily. "Not yet, but I'm getting a smell out of this deal I don't like. If Fenton does buy the Wagon Wheel, the basin'll be hotter'n hell. I'd like to discourage him."

"Fetch him around," Red said. "I'll discourage him."

"See you in the morning," Grant said and, stepping past Red, left the cabin.

For a moment Red didn't move. He was staring at Rennie with the cool detachment of one who had no strong feeling about her. He said finally, "So you want to leave the valley?"

She laid the knife back on the stove. "I am going to leave the valley, and I'm not going to marry Bugeye."

"You're half right," Red said. "You're leaving the valley, but you're marrying Bugeye. I've got plans for you and I've waited a long time. I ain't passing it up now."

SHE glared at him, hating him, but at the same time she was fully aware of the strength of his will. He was lazy and indolent, and he seldom made an issue about anything, but when he did, there was nothing that could turn him from his purpose. In the end he would wear her down if she stayed.

"There's biscuits, and I made coffee," she said in a low tone. "You fry the trout. I'm going to bed."

"Was I you," Red said, "I wouldn't try to get out of the valley. I'll beat hell out of you if you do. On the other hand, you'll be in clover if you do what I tell you."

She walked to her lean-to room and shut and barred the door. She heard Red shout, "Let her alone, you fool! You've waited a long time. You can wait a few more days."

"Hell, I'm going to marry her, ain't I?"

"You bet you are, but you'll wait till you are married. Don't forget it."

She sat down on her bunk, her head in her hands. She did not light the lamp. She just sat there, the seconds ticking away as childhood memories crowded into her mind of gunfire and death and a long ride through the dark night, of being carried in the saddle by a man she had never seen before or since. She remembered whimpering, and the man threatening, "Shut that up or I'll whop you good." They had reached a mountain cabin at dawn, and Red had been there. It was the

first time she had ever seen him.

"Get him?" Red had asked.

"He was gone," the man who had brought Rennie said. "We got the horses and five thousand he had in his safe. Here's the brat, but I'm damned if I know what you want to do with her."

"I know," Red had said.

Funny, she thought, how that one scene stood out so clearly in her mind that had been clouded by time and fear. She had no memory of her father or where she had lived. She remembered leaving the mountain cabin with Red and Bugeye who had been just a kid then; she remembered drifting from one place to another. Red had been afraid to stay anywhere for more than a few weeks.

Then they had settled in High Valley. There had been no more drifting, although Red and Bugeye and most of the other valley men made long trips which they never explained. When she had asked Red about her folks, he had said blandly he didn't know, that she was his girl now.

She had to get out. She said it over and over in her mind. She considered trying to escape tonight. There was one small window that was big enough for her to slip through, but she knew one of them would be outside. They would not take any chances tonight.

She took off her clothes and put on a worn nightgown, but it was a long time before she could sleep. When she did, the nightmare came again, of gunfire and dead men and the smell of powdersmoke. She was sitting up when she woke, her throat dry, and she realized she had been screaming as she always did when she had the nightmare.

Red was pounding on her door, shouting, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Go away!" she said. "I was just dreaming."

She heard Red walk away and she lay back, cold sweat breaking through her skin. . . .

It was nearly midnight when Grant turned his buckskin into the corral. The darkness was relieved only by the faint glitter of the stars. There was a light in Linda's room. He hesitated, remembering how she had welcomed Fenton, insisting that he have his supper in the house with her. Grant wondered if Fenton was sleeping in the house. He found the thought distasteful, even though it was no real business of his.

GRANT hesitated for a moment, knowing it would be difficult to see Linda alone tomorrow. He walked to the house, feeling that he had to talk to her, yet not sure that this was the right time. He never knew what Linda would do or say. He had no real hope he could change her mind about selling, but he had to try.

He opened the front door and stepped into the living room. A shaft of lamplight fell halfway across the room from Linda's bedroom, and he heard her call, "That you, Grant?"

"It's me. You in bed?"

"No. Come in, Grant."

He paused, eyes on the gilt-framed picture on the inside wall, the fringe of light touching it. It was of a young woman, an attractive one dressed in a wedding gown. Joe had never said who she was, but Grant had often seen him stand before it and stare at it, a pensive expression on his deeply-lined face. Grant had often wondered about her, but Joe had made it plain that it was one thing he would not talk about.

"Break your leg, Grant?" Linda called.

He walked into her room and stopped. She was sitting in front of her mirror brushing her hair that lay in a long red mass down her back. She gave him a quick smile and, looking into the mirror again, went on with her brushing. She was in her nightgown, a gossamer silk garment with fine white lace around her round breasts.

"I didn't know—" he began.

"Don't be bashful," she said tartly. "After all, you're one of the family, aren't you?"

"Not exactly," he said.

He sat down in a rocking chair, stiff and uncomfortable. Looking at Linda, he

was stirred as any man would have been, then he remembered what Mamie had said about her and for the first time he half-believed she was right.

As he had many times before, he wondered why Joe had married Linda. Yet the reason was not hard to find. She was attractive, and Joe had often talked about what a woman could do for the Wagon Wheel. But in that regard he had made a poor choice, for she had changed nothing. She had been too lazy even to paper the walls, and they had needed new paper for years.

There was no sound for a moment except the steady whisper of the brush, then she laid it down and turned to him, asking, "How do you like Fenton, Grant?"

"I don't. I don't like anything about him."

She laughed softly. "You wouldn't like anybody who wanted to buy the Wagon Wheel, would you?"

"No, reckon I wouldn't."

"Well, you can quit worrying about losing your job. I made it clear that you went with the ranch, and he promised to keep you on as foreman."

She said it as if that made everything right. She was shallow, he thought, shallow and utterly selfish, and if he talked the rest of the night, he could never make her understand how he felt.

"Thanks," he said.

"He wants to look at High Valley tomorrow," she said. "He says that the Wagon Wheel could run twice the number of cattle we have now if we had the valley for summer range, and it would give the other basin men more grass in the Big Bears."

"I'll take him up in the morning," Grant said, "but it won't do any good."

"You underestimate Fenton," she said. "We had a long talk after supper. He said you were doubtful about his ability to pay for the ranch, so he promised to have the money deposited with Ira Connors before we close the deal."

HE ROLLED a cigarette. "Linda, I had a couple of ideas today that you might like. I was hoping you'd like 'em well enough to keep the ranch."

"I doubt it, but I'm glad you're thinking about me."

"I figured you wanted to sell because you're lonesome. There ain't another woman within five miles of here except Mamie Dolan, so I thought I'd get a girl who'd do your house work and you'd have somebody to talk to. No reason why you shouldn't go to dances and have a good time. I mean—well, Joe's been dead for three months. No need for you to go on mourning for him."

"Would you take me?"

He fished a match from his vest pocket. "Sure. Or Bruce Mayer could. There's a passel of single men in the valley who'll come courting you soon as they find out you're of a mind for it."

"What girl are you thinking about?"

"I might be able to get Rennie Johnson."

"I thought so." She whirled back to the mirror and began brushing her hair again in short, angry motions. "I think I'll sell."

CHAPTER VIII

Stubborn Woman

ANGER stirring in him, Grant fired his cigarette. Linda had never seen Rennie. There was no reason for her to take that attitude. Rennie kept the Johnson cabin scrupulously clean and she would work hard to please Linda, because she wouldn't want to go back to High Valley. But there was no use pressing the point.

"I had another idea," he said. "I talked to Marty Reem today. He has a nice little house in town and he said we could rent it. I thought you'd like to live in Rocky Fork where you could talk to other women."

"That would be wonderful," she said sarcastically. "There are so many places

in Rocky Fork to go. I'll sell, Grant, and I'll take my money and go back to Denver. It isn't women I'm interested in talking to."

He pulled on his cigarette, the anger growing in him. "Linda, this ain't a proposition of keeping my job. I can always make a living. Mamie offered me a job today."

Linda dropped her brush, making a loud clatter on the marble top of her bureau. She turned to look at him, her lips parted. "What kind of a job could *she* give you?"

"She says a big one. She's going to bust the Wagon Wheel. She'll have Seven Bar cows all over this end of the basin. I don't know what she's got in her head, but she's crazy enough to try anything."

Linda shrugged. "Well, it'll be Fenton's worry."

"No, it's yours. Fenton won't buy the Wagon Wheel. Not for fifty thousand like you're counting on. Nobody but you would be fool enough to think he would."

She rose, her cheeks touched by the torch of anger. "So I'm crazy! All right, maybe I am. Maybe I'll take less than fifty thousand. I just want to get it through your thick skull that I won't stay in this God-forsaken hole."

"You deal with Fenton," Grant said hotly, "and you'll leave here broke. He's a fake if I ever saw one. I ought to run him off the ranch."

She stood looking at him, the anger in her dying. Smiling, she said, "Grant, you're just a dreamer. I've had enough hard luck to be practical. This is the first chance I ever had to get money, real money, I mean. Saying I'm crazy and calling Fenton a fake don't change anything."

He got up, shaking his head. "There's one thing I'd give a pretty to make you understand. When Joe was alive, I never really savvied how big he was. He never went around talking about it, but when he was alive the basin had peace because of him. He had a way of making men talk their troubles over and settling them. That's why the Wagon Wheel is different from the other ranches. If you stay and I run it, it can keep on being like it was."

"I see," she breathed. "You want to wear Joe's boots. You want people looking up to you. That it?"

That wasn't it at all. Perhaps no one, unless it was Marty Reem, could understand how Grant felt. Money had never been important to Joe. Integrity and self-respect had been. That was why the Wagon Wheel had been the ranch it was, but it was all part of the pattern that meant nothing to Linda.

"You can put it that way," he said grimly, "but that ain't the point. I know what'll happen if we don't get rid of Fenton."

"You said he wouldn't buy," she jeered.

"He will at his own price, and I'm thinking that's what Mamie's working for. I've got a hunch she's the one who had him write to you."

"Now you're the one who's crazy."

"Maybe so. Well go ahead and sell. Men will die and you can blame yourself for it."

"I'll be a long ways from here." Then she smiled and put her hands on his shoulders. "You're such a child, Grant. I've offered you the way to keep the ranch, but you don't like me well enough to take it that way."

SHE was close to him, so close that he could feel the pressure of her breasts. Her full, red lips were parted, waiting for his kiss. A sudden weakness was in him, and with it came the thought that maybe Joe would have wanted it this way.

"Maybe I do," he said.

Her arms went around his neck and brought his lips down to hers, and in that moment of heady passion he lost his certainty that this was not the thing he wanted. His arms went around her, hands pressed against the silky softness of her back, and her lips were sweet and filled with promise.

She drew back, laughing softly. "You *are* a child, Grant, but I'll make you grow up. I like size and I like money. You can get them for me and I can do so much for you."

"How?"

"Joe wouldn't listen to me, but it's sim-

ple. We'll go after High Valley. I've heard Bruce's ideas and they're good. About winter feeding. We'll flood the meadow land along the creek and raise hay. We'll build a big house. We'll double the size of our herd. Big money, Grant. A vacation every year in Denver and all the clothes I want."

He looked at her, hating her and hating himself for his moment of weakness. He wanted her, and if it had been another time and she had been another woman, he would have taken her, but she was Joe's widow, and Grant understood now more than he ever had that marriage to Joe had not changed her. Nothing would ever change her. She stood for everything that was opposite to what Joe had stood for as completely as Mamie Dolan and Cole Fenton did.

"No," he said bitterly. "It wouldn't work."

"Your d a m n e d conscience," she breathed. "You're not a man, Grant, not a real man who wants what other men want."

"I want it," he breathed, "but not your way."

"My way!" she cried. "You've got milk in your veins or you'd want it my—"

He heard the rifle shot, the tinkle of glass falling to the floor, the snap of the bullet that missed him by a few inches and buried itself in the wall. He hit the floor, dragging Linda with him. She swore angrily, not understanding, but he held her there, an arm around her waist. Two more shots, smashing more glass from the window.

"Stay down, damn it!" he said. "Flat on your belly."

He lunged out of the bedroom and crossed the front room. Outside the darkness seemed absolute as he stood with his back against the wall of the house, gun in hand. Again the rifle cracked from the willows along the creek. He fired at the flashes, and dropped flat as the rifleman emptied his Winchester, bullets ripping into the wall beside which he had stood.

Men spilled out of the bunkhouse, Bruce Mayer bawling, "What's going on?"

"Stay out of the light!" Grant called.

"Who the hell's doing the shooting?" Mayer shouted.

It was a crazy question, and Grant wondered why the man had asked it. Then he heard the receding drum beats of a galloping horse, and Curly Tell shouted, "He's pulling out! Just busting up our sleep."

They came on to the house, Fenton with the crew. They had pulled their pants over their drawers and they had their guns. Mayer said, "Let's go after him."

"No use," Grant said. "He'd be a mile away from here by the time we got saddled up."

Linda had put on her robe. She brought the lamp from the bedroom and stood in the door, the light falling across the yard. The men instinctively stepped away from it, and Grant said irritably, "Take the lamp back."

BUT she stood there, looking at Grant uncertainly. She asked, "Who do you think it was?"

Grant thought, "It was probably Ben Piper. Or Bugeye Johnson." But he could not prove anything against either of them, and he saw no reason to tell Linda who he suspected.

"Hard to tell," he said.

Bruce Mayer swaggered up, his chin thrust defiantly at Grant. "So we've got ourselves a fight with somebody, but you don't know who it is. That right?"

"That's right."

"And chances are we'll have more of it when we start the drive. Somebody don't want us to get that herd to Placerville. Ira Connors maybe. That right?"

"Don't know about that."

"Looks that way to me," Mayer said. "What I want to know is if we're getting fighting wages from now on."

Grant could not see the expressions on the face of the others, Curly Tell and Dick Sharples and the rest, men who had ridden for the Wagon Wheel for years. Grant asked them, "You boys expecting fighting wages?"

"Hell, no," Sharples said.

"There's your answer, Bruce," Grant said.

"Then I don't want no part of it," Mayer bawled. "I'm quitting."

"Suits me," Grant said. "You can draw your time in the morning."

"Hell, I'm pulling out now." Mayer swung to Fenton. "You can see what you're buying. Well, you ain't buying me with it."

Mayer wheeled and disappeared into the darkness. Fenton moved up, and in the lamplight Grant saw that he was trembling, but whether his fear was real or pretended was a question in Grant's mind.

"You must have some idea about this, Talbot," Fenton said.

"Not much. There's always somebody trying to pull the top dog down. We'll handle it." Grant nodded at Tell. "You'd better stay up, Curly."

"Sure," Tell said.

They drifted away into the darkness. Linda had gone back into the living room and set the lamp on the table. When Grant turned to her, she said, "I wouldn't put it past you to arrange this so Fenton would be scared out of buying."

"It's a good idea if I'd thought about it," he said, "but if I had, I'd have fixed it so that first bullet wouldn't have come as close as it did."

She considered that a moment, her face taut with fear. She said in a low voice, "You can forget about kissing me. You're right. It wouldn't work. I've been chasing the wrong man ever since Joe died."

"Yeah, the wrong man," he said. "I'll have Curly fix your window in the morning. Go to bed."

She picked up the lamp and walked into her bedroom. For a moment Grant lingered, eyes moving to the picture on the wall and again he wondered who she was. Then he thought about Joe Dexter and his sense of loyalty to Joe's memory and to Wagon Wheel. Anyone else would have considered it foolish, but it was a part of him, something that had developed through the years of working and living and riding with Joe Dexter. He could no more free himself from it than he could his right arm.

He went out, closing the front door, and crossed the yard to the bunkhouse. Perhaps Mamie Dolan had been right in saying he was in love with a ranch. In that respect he was exactly like Joe when the old man had been alive. All of his dreams and hopes were tied up with the Wagon Wheel and Rainbow Basin. . . .

MAMIE DOLAN was still awake when Ben Piper rode in and put up his horse. She fumbled for a match, found one, and lighted the lamp on the stand at the head of her bed. She pulled herself upright and slipped a pillow behind her back. When Piper came into the house, she called:

"Ben!"

He appeared in the doorway, his battered face as raw as a piece of beefsteak. Mamie shook her head as she looked at him. She said, "Talbot's the best fighting man in the basin. I didn't figure he'd listen to me today, but he can't help hating the Dexter woman. I thought it was worth a try."

Piper dropped onto a rawhide-bottom chair, his Winchester across his lap. "He's damn near a corpse. I sure had a bead on him, but I missed."

"You fool!" Mamie shouted. "I didn't tell you to kill him. I just said to stir things up so that Dexter woman would be willing to sell."

"I figure I done that. Talbot rode in late. 'Bout midnight. Don't know where he'd been. Linda was in her bedroom and Talbot went in to talk to her. Looked like they was arguing, then he kissed her."

"You're lying!" Mamie cried.

Piper shrugged. "All right, I'm a liar. You want to hear this or not?"

She picked up a cigar from the stand. "Go ahead."

He scowled at her. "You ain't purty smoking a cigar. I don't know why you think you are."

"I'm not purty without one, neither. Get on with your yarn."

"Like I said, they was close together and I took a crack at him. I missed and they

hit the floor. I shot a couple more times, then he comes out on the porch and throws some lead at me. I threw some back but it was dark as hell outside the house, so don't reckon I got him."

"You are a fool," she said again angrily. "We've got one killing to our credit. A second one would stir up a hornet's nest."

He shrugged. "Reckon it would if Steve Ollard knew Joe was killed. Anyhow, I've got a hunch there'd be damned few tears wasted on Talbot. A lot of men want Wagon Wheel range. If he was out of the way, they'd try for it."

CHAPTER IX

Weaver of the Web

MAMIE DOLAN was silent a moment, rolling the cigar between her fingers. Piper was right. Grant Talbot shared Joe Dexter's talent for leadership. As long as he was alive and rodding the Wagon Wheel, he would retain the respect that Dexter had held.

"I don't want him killed," she said finally. "Not yet. We're taking that range ourselves and we don't want to buck every other outfit in the basin to get it."

"All right, all right," Piper grunted. "But I say you were loco for calling him in and showing him your hand."

"I tell you it was worth trying. Nobody's going to worry about us. Not yet anyhow."

He rose. "Well, I'm going to bed."

"Ben, that fight was your idea. Now get it out of your head that you have to drill Talbot because he licked you."

"It was Fenton's notion. He figured Talbot could be run out of the country if he got a good licking. Then I pulled a knife and Fenton tripped me, damn him."

"Cole's got more brains in his little finger than you have in your head," she said coldly. "You wouldn't be any good to us in jail. You got a licking and you won't be happy till you beef Talbot. Wait till the sign's right, Ben. You hear?"

He glowered at her, gently feeling of his face with his left hand, his Winchester in his right. She knew that he was proud, that he was a man who could never forget an injury, but the years had established the habit of obedience in him, and she had no doubt that he would continue to obey.

"You're fighting Dexter's ghost," he said complainingly, "and his ghost is in Talbot. I tell you we can't win till he's kicked the bucket."

"Damn it," she shouted, "I've waited a long time for this! I won't have you busting my chances by beefing Talbot before I'm ready for it."

"Why?"

"For one thing I don't want Ollard on our necks."

He laughed scornfully. "Who's afraid of Ollard?" he asked, and left the room.

She fired her cigar, finding some satisfaction in it. She had never understood the complexities of her own nature. She only knew that as far back as she could remember, she had cursed the luck that had caused her to be born a woman. It was a man's world and she had to live the way the men did, require obedience and get it, be looked up to in the way Joe Dexter had been. That was why she had challenged him ten years ago, but she had been too young. She had made a bad gamble and lost.

The fact that Joe Dexter had let her stay in the basin had not made her think any better of him. If anything, it had made her hate him more than ever, the kind of hatred that had seared her soul. But she had learned to wait, to be patient until she had the strength to win. She had that strength now. Dexter's killing, carefully done so that it would look like an accident, had been the first step in her plan.

She could count on Piper, for he had the kind of doglike devotion that would remain constant as long as he was alive. She could count on Bruce Mayer as long as she could pay him. She could count on Cole Fenton. He was her brother, and in

her family blood ties were strong.

It had taken her a long time to persuade him that this was a good plan, that the money he had made in mining camps could be doubled in Rainbow Basin. She knew that he had long wanted to go into the cattle business, and she had convinced him that this was the time and the place, that he could start off with her as a partner, owning a big spread without nursing a small outfit as she had done.

SHE possessed a sharp and calculating mind, and the capacity to weigh every aspect of the situation with cold logic. The men in town formed the one imponderable, but she was convinced that their respect for Joe Dexter had been based on fear as much as anything, that Ira Connors would have no scruples about closing out the Wagon Wheel if he had the chance, now that Dexter was dead.

For ten years she had nursed her hatred for Joe Dexter, saving every cent she could with miserly persistence, even against Piper's judgment. He had insisted that an investment in a good bull would more than pay dividends.

She had succeeded in buying Mayer, but it was not until Dexter had married Linda and brought her home from Denver that Mamie had worked out the details of her plan.

Mayer had told her that Linda was cheap and shallow and unprincipled. She had correctly gauged Linda's willingness to sell if Dexter were out of the way. Now it was a simple matter. Linda could be frightened until she was willing to take Cole's offer.

She had finished her cigar when she heard a horse coming up the trail from the creek. She called, "Ben!" She could hear him snoring in the other bedroom, and she called again, suddenly frantic, "Ben, somebody's coming!"

He grunted sleepily, and she screamed, "Damn it, Ben, get up and see who it is!"

The bed squeaked as he swung his feet to the floor. "All right, all right," he said sleepily, and she heard him pat to the front door. He opened it, calling, "Who is it?"

"Mayer."

Mamie swore. She could hire a man and give him orders, but she couldn't give him brains. He had no business coming here. Talbot might have followed, and once Talbot understood what Mayer was doing, his usefulness would be ended.

A moment later Mayer came into the house. She heard the hum of low talk between him and Piper, and she shouted, "Get in here, both of you! Don't stand out there gabbing to each other."

They came in, Piper in his underclothes, his Winchester in his right hand. Mayer was tired and cranky, and for a moment panic touched her. Something was wrong.

"Ben was currying me down," Mayer said truculently. "I don't like it. I done what I thought was best."

"You done what?"

"I quit."

"Why, damn you—" She stopped, warned by the dark and barren quality of his face. "What happened?"

"After the shooting, everybody was boogered," Mayer answered. "I put up a holler for fighting wages, figuring that would break the widow and if she didn't give in, some of the boys would pull out with me."

"Did they?"

"No. After it boiled up, I had to get out."

She nodded, thinking he should have known that Dick Sharples and Curly Tell and the others who had worked for the Wagon Wheel for years would not follow him. Actually it didn't make much difference whether Mayer stayed on the Wagon Wheel or not. The showdown was close.

"All right," she said. "It was a good play if it had worked."

He stood there, scowling, and it struck her that Piper had been right when he'd said they were fighting Joe Dexter's ghost and the ghost was in Talbot. It was in Sharples and Tell and all of them as long as Talbot was alive and heading the outfit.

FOR a moment she was tempted to tell Piper to go ahead and drygulch him, then she put the thought from her. Talbot

had to suffer. She wanted to mock him with her triumph.

"You see Fenton?" Piper asked.

"He's there," Mayer said. "Ate supper in the house with Linda and they had a palaver. I didn't get no chance to see him alone, but he slept in the bunkhouse and he did some talking about keeping the crew on when he bought the spread. He's going to High Valley in the morning."

"With Talbot?" Mamie asked.

"He didn't say, but I reckon he will."

"You can't stay here," Mamie said. "Sleep in the timber. Tomorrow after Cole and Talbot get back into the basin, you go see Red Johnson. Offer him five hundred dollars to hit the Wagon Wheel when the crew's gone. Burn the buildings, but don't have them hurt Linda. After Cole talks to him, Johnson will be ready to listen to you."

"How'll you get the crew away from the Wagon Wheel?"

"It'll be done. You find out when they'll do the job."

Mayer took off his Stetson and rubbed his bald head. He shifted uneasily, glancing at Piper, then bringing his gaze back to Mamie. He said, "I don't cotton to that idea, ma'am. Like as not them High Valley hombres will fill my hide with lead."

"Not if you tell 'em you're working for me."

"Send Piper."

"No!" Mamie cried. "I can't take any chances on being left alone."

"It's risky," Mayer muttered, "and I ain't getting enough—"

"You're getting paid damned good!" Mamie shouted angrily. "You ain't done a hell of a lot to earn your *dinero* so far."

"I cracked Joe on the head and tossed him over the cliff, didn't I?" Mayer demanded. "That's worth all you've paid me."

She laughed, a taunting sound that stirred the sullen anger in Mayer. She saw now how she could hold him as long as she needed him. Fear was a stronger force in Mayer than his greed.

"That's exactly what you did, Bruce," she said. "Now remember one thing. I sit on my front porch every day. I watch the Wagon Wheel, and with the glasses I've got I can recognize every pair of pants the Dexter woman puts on the line. I can spot a fly walking up the trail to High Valley. Suppose Steve Ollard gets to wondering what made Dexter fall off that trail? Suppose I tell him I just happened to be watching the trail that day?"

"You'd be in trouble, Bruce," Piper said. "Yes sir, you might even get your neck stretched."

"And suppose I tell Ollard what *I* know?" Mayer demanded bitterly. "Me spying on Dexter and Linda and you paying me to beef the old man?"

"Can you prove that?" Mamie asked, and when Mayer lowered his gaze, she added, "If you're as smart as I think you are, Bruce, you'll keep on playing with us and you'll wind up a rich man."

MAYER stared at her, the tip of his tongue running over dry lips. "All right. I'll tell 'em."

Wheeling, Mayer left the house. Piper stood motionless until they heard his horse leave, then he said, "You got a mighty weak link in your chain, betting your pile on that hombre."

"No, he'll be all right," she said. "He's afraid to pull out now."

"Maybe," Piper said, and quickly left the room.

Mamie drew the lamp toward her and blew it out. She slid onto her back and slipped a pillow under her head. She closed her eyes but she could not sleep. She wondered why she was not like other women, feeling the need of a man, wanting nice clothes and a home and children.

But she was the way she was; she would never be any different, and she must use men to achieve her purpose. They were like wild animals in the forest, she thought, she and Grant Talbot and Ira Connors and her brother Cole and the Dexter woman. All of them. She must devour the others or be devoured, and she could not bring herself to consider the possibility of a second defeat. She preferred death to that.

CHAPTER X

The Outlaws Gather

BREAKFAST was eaten by lamplight. Grant ate with the crew. No one mentioned Bruce Mayer, yet Grant sensed the men were thinking about him. In all the time Bruce had been here he had never quite fitted, but he was a tophand and that was the reason Joe had kept him.

After Joe's death, Linda had insisted that Mayer remain, probably because he was the only man on the ranch who frankly courted her. Now Grant was glad the man was gone. He could count on the others.

Fenton came in as the crew rose from the table, Grant said, "I'll saddle a horse for you. Linda says you want to go to High Valley."

"That's right," Fenton said.

Grant left the bunkhouse with the crew. He saddled his buckskin and caught and saddled a bay mare for Fenton. Dick Sharples said slowly, "He wants to be a cowman. Why don't you let him ride Thunder?"

Thunder was a roan gelding, a mean horse possessing a deceptive air that took in the unwary. Curly Tell laughed shortly. "Good idea, Grant. With a little luck Thunder might break that ornery son's neck."

"That'd suit me," Grant said, "but I ain't giving Linda any excuse to fire me if I can help it. She might get Mayer back to rod the outfit."

Sharples swore. "She might at that."

"Curly, you fix Linda's window before you ride out. There's some glass in the storeroom."

Grant looked at grizzled old Dick Sharples who had ridden into the basin with Joe Dexter when he had brought the first Wagon Wheel herd across the Big Bears, and on around the half circle of riders to young Kit Bellew. He knew they were thinking the same thing he was, that time was short and Ira Connors would not give Linda an hour he didn't have to.

Everything, or so it seemed to Grant, was playing into Cole Fenton's hands. Funny how Joe had regarded money. It just hadn't been important. He could always borrow from Connors when he needed to and owing the banker had never given him a moment's worry. Now his indifference to being in debt was putting a burden upon all of them.

"We'll make it, boy," Sharples said. "You go play nursemaid to the greenhorn."

"Keep your eyes peeled," Grant said. "If I'm reading the sign right, the business last night was just a beginning."

They nodded and rode away, and Grant led his buckskin and the bay mare to the bunkhouse. Fenton came out, firing a cigar as he stepped through the door. He cast a wary glance at the mare and cleared his throat.

"I ain't much of a horseman," he said. "It's something I'll have to learn. I know cowboys like their fun, but if that mare bucks me off, I ain't going to call it fun."

"You're sure you want to get in the cattle business?" Grant asked.

Fenton gave him a thin smile. "I want in it all right, but I don't aim to entertain you while I'm getting in. I'll learn the business just like I learned how to handle mining claims, but it won't be overnight."

"Climb on," Grant said testily. "Sadle here wouldn't pile a buttercup."

"Well, I ain't a buttercup," Fenton said, and swung awkwardly into saddle.

Linda stepped out on the porch as they passed the house, and waved to them. She was wearing a robe over her nightgown, her red hair reaching far down her back. On her rich, full lips was a smile for Cole Fenton.

"When will you be back, Grant?" she called.

"About noon," he said shortly.

"I'll have dinner for you, Mr. Fenton,"

she said. "I hope you like peach pie."

He touched his derby, smiling genially. "I love it, Mrs. Dexter."

THEY rode on, angling northeast across the gently sloping floor of the basin to the wall. When the house was half a mile behind them, Fenton said, "She's mighty attractive, Talbot. It's surprising you haven't married her."

"Joe's been dead just three months," Grant said curtly.

"Why, that's time enough to get engaged. It would seem the natural move for both of you."

"My business."

"Of course," Fenton said smoothly. "No offense, Talbot. Mrs. Dexter is a charming woman and an excellent cook. I'm interested in her myself. The only reason I'm bringing this up is because I don't want to step on your toes."

"You won't get nowhere. Not after last night. Linda wants to go to Denver."

Fenton chewed on his cigar a moment. "Well, I've known women to change their minds."

They were silent until they reached the base of the north wall. Fenton, staring up at the ribbonlike trail, shook his head. He asked, "This mare sure-footed?"

"Like a goat," Grant said, and started the climb.

Fenton followed, one hand gripping the saddle-horn. When they reached the first switchback they stopped to blow their horses. Grant, glancing at Fenton, saw that the man's face was gray and pinched, and that he carefully avoided looking below him at the basin floor.

"You couldn't drive cattle up here, could you?" Fenton asked in a low voice.

"I wouldn't."

"Must be some other way into High Valley."

"Yeah, there's another trail in from the east. It's the long way around, but the best way to take cattle in."

They went on, their mounts laboring under them. The sun was well up now, driving the last of the night shadows from the basin and taking the chill from the air. It would be warm, contrasting sharply with the cold, windy morning of the day before.

Half an hour later they reached the top, making the last sharp climb through a break in the slick, red rock rim, and again Grant stopped to blow their horses. Color returned to Fenton's face. Piñons crowded the trail, the cliff fifty feet to the south. Grant knew how it was with Fenton. Panic had momentarily left the man, for at this point he was far enough from the edge to have the feeling of security that comes from being on level ground again.

"Scared?" Grant asked contemptuously.

Fenton gave him a wry grin. "I'm not enough of a hypocrite to deny that I was when we were coming up. I've always been scared of steep places, so I feel some satisfaction in being able to make a ride like this."

Grant rolled a smoke, remembering that Fenton had appeared frightened last night after the shooting. Grant had had the feeling he was play-acting then, but he wasn't acting now. Sweat made a bright shine across his face and the corners of his mouth were still trembling.

"You'll never pay fifty thousand for the Wagon Wheel," Grant said. "Who are you trying to fool?"

Fenton shrugged. "Myself perhaps. What I pay will depend on what I find in High Valley. I'm a man who looks ahead to the potential, Talbot, not at what Dexter did in the past."

Fenton stared at the basin, a great yawning hole before him, its tawny, grass-covered floor sweeping out before them to the east until it was lost in a jumbled land of foothills and mesas. On beyond were the San Juan Mountains, granite teeth raking the sky.

WATCHING him, Grant wondered what was in his mind and what had actually brought him here. He wondered, too, whether it was Mamie Dolan or Fenton who had lied about them not knowing each other. The more he thought about Mamie, the more he was puzzled by her, but he was convinced she had made an

honest effort to hire him.

"Last night Mrs. Dexter said that this fellow Mayer had talked about flooding the meadow along the creek," Fenton said thoughtfully. "She believed it was practical and that it would be smart to put up hay and winter feed."

Grant said nothing. From where he sat his saddle he could see the Wagon Wheel and Seven Bar buildings and several other ranches to the east. In the distance the town of Rocky Fork was visible, cut down to toy-size by the miles. Bell Creek made a meandering green streak across the floor of the basin.

A few dirt dams would do exactly what Bruce Mayer had said, and in time someone would build them. Joe Dexter had been satisfied to go on the way he had always gone, and Grant had not known until last night that there had ever been any discussion between Joe and Linda about the way he had run the Wagon Wheel.

"Well?" Fenton demanded. "It is practical, isn't it?"

"Sure, but it would take money."

"Hell, Dexter was the biggest cowman in the basin, wasn't he?"

Grant nodded. "Which same didn't mean he had much cash. He always owed money to the bank. Being a good cowman didn't make Joe a good business man."

Reining his horse around, Grant started down the slope into High Valley. They were in the pines at once, hoofs dropping softly into the thick mat of needles that had slowly piled up through the centuries. Fenton, riding behind Grant, called, "Good grass here. Any water?"

Grant pointed downslope. "There's a good creek yonder. Never goes dry."

"Well, sir, I'm damned if I can see why Dexter would pass this up."

"You will when we get to Johnson's place," Grant said.

The trail angled down a steep pitch and twisted through close-growing aspens, a bright orange island in a sea of pine. Presently they reached the creek, with the Johnson cabin directly ahead of them. Grant saw at once that Red had done his job well.

There were a dozen men in front of the cabin. All of them were armed, as tough a crew as Grant had ever seen, and he thought of what Rennie had said about them. If they were outlaws who made High Valley their hideout, the sheriff was satisfied to remain ignorant of it.

As Grant rode up, he saw that Rennie was standing in the doorway, dark brown eyes pinned questioningly on him, her fine-featured face filled with worry. She was wearing men's clothes as she always did, but they did not disguise the fact that she was very much of a woman, although Grant judged she was unaware that she possessed a face and figure that would attract the attention of any man who saw her.

Grant reined up, nodded at Red Johnson who stood a pace ahead of the others, his jaws working steadily on a chew of tobacco. Grant said, "Howdy, gents."

Red kept on chewing, a big man who looked smaller than he was because he seldom stood erect. Bugeye was at his right and somewhat behind his father, protruding eyes filled with a baleful wickedness as he stared at Grant.

It struck Grant that for years he had got along with everybody. Now, in less than twenty-four hours, he had succeeded

Shades of Buffalo Bill

OKLAHOMA'S first buffalo hunt since Indian Territory days started recently in Edmond with tracks found in a flower bed and ended without a shot being fired.

Three buffalo cows started the excitement by meandering through an open gate on the ranch of C. A. Cargill. The cows surrendered quite meekly when roped by volunteer buffalo hunters.

Cargill said the first he knew anything was up was when a woman excitedly reported that some flower beds were being "tromped by some enormous animals." Shades of Buffalo Bill!

—*Harold Helfer*

in making enemies of Bugeye and Ben Piper, both dangerous because they were the kind who would have no scruples about drygulching a man.

Gib Lane, bearded and dirty, threw out a hand toward Fenton. "Where'd you pick that up, Talbot?"

"Shut your mug up, Gib," Red said without turning. "What's on your mind, Talbot?"

Bugeye snickered. "He can't have something on what he ain't got."

Red gave him a clout with the back of his hand. "Damn you, shut up! I'll do the gabbing."

"This is Cole Fenton," Grant said. "He's fixing to buy the Wagon Wheel."

Red scratched a stubble-covered jaw, grinning. "First time I ever see a feller who wore a derby that was aiming to be a rancher."

CHAPTER XI

Ultimatum

COLE FENTON was leaning forward over the saddle-horn, making a cool study of the men before him. Grant, glancing at him, could detect no fear in him. He was surprised, for there was danger here, so evident that it was an invisible force laid against them.

He could not believe that Fenton was unaware of it. It did not make sense that he would be afraid of high places, yet would not fear men like these who would kill both of them if Red gave the sign.

"I figure that what a man wears on his head is his own business," Fenton said to Red Johnson. "I asked Talbot to bring me here for two reasons, but there's one thing that bothers me. I didn't expect to find all of you together."

"I sent for 'em," Red said. "I got a smell that persuaded me a man-sized polecat was around. Now you said something about reasons."

"Two of them. But about that smell. Sure it wasn't a whiff of yourself you got?"

Gib Lane guffawed. "What'd I tell you, Red? You ain't had your bath this year."

Red wheeled on him, a great fist swinging to Lane's jaw and knocking him flat on his back. "If I hear any more smart alec talk from any of you, I'll gunwhip the man." He turned back to Fenton. "Get on with your talk."

"If I buy the Wagon Wheel," Fenton said easily, "I'll need this valley for summer range. The way I understand it, you boys run only a few head of stock. Now I said I came here for two reasons. One was to have a look at the grass. The other was to tell you that next spring I'm aiming to drive a herd into this valley."

"You won't do no such of a thing!" Red shouted. "We've been here a long time and we like the valley the way it is. We don't cotton to the notion of having a passel of strangers messing it up."

"I'll pay you anything within reason," Fenton went on. "No hurry about it now, but come spring I'll want to know your price. Stay, if you want to, but my crew and my herd will be there."

Red leaned forward and spat, the brown stream stirring the dust at his feet. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, a boldly contemptuous gesture. "Come ahead, mister, and I'll kill you."

"Hell, what are we waiting till spring for?" Bugeye bawled, and went for his gun.

It was unprovoked and surprising, and Grant was caught flatfooted. As he reached for his own gun, he knew he was too slow, that Bugeye could kill both of them. But the boy's gun was never fired, for Rennie let go with the Winchester, firing from her hip, the slug kicking up dust between Bugeye's feet.

"Drop your iron," she screamed, "or I'll raise my sights!"

Bugeye let his gun go and made a slow turn to face Rennie. Fenton had jerked a short-barreled gun out from a shoulder

holster. Grant said, "Put it back."

Fenton obeyed, nodding as if he understood. Red laid a hand on Bugeye's shoulder. He said, "Go to the barn. You ain't too big to whip."

Bugeye hesitated, staring at Rennie, then he turned and shambled across the dusty, hoof-trodden yard to the log barn.

Red jabbed a finger at Fenton. "I'm giving you fifteen minutes to get out of High Valley. Otherwise I'll put a window in your skull. Don't never come back."

"You've had your chance for a fair deal," Fenton said coldly. "You throwed it away, so I'll take High Valley for nothing when the time comes."

Reining his mare around, Fenton rode back up the creek. Grant hesitated, his eyes on Red. He said, "This wasn't my idea."

"Sure, son," Red said, "but if you ride for that hairpin, it might just as well have been your notion."

WHEELING his buckskin, Grant rode after Fenton. They were silent until they reached the rim, then Grant said with deep bitterness, "Joe went out of his way to get along with that bunch. Now you've spoiled it in five minutes, and for nothing."

"The more I hear of Joe Dexter," Fenton said carelessly, "the more I'm convinced he was the most overrated man in Colorado. This bunch will be out of High Valley by spring, and I'll move in without trouble."

They started down the trail to the basin, Grant thinking, "He knows better. He never figured on taking High Valley."

When they were halfway to the bottom Grant saw that Fenton was gripping the saddle-horn, his shoulders hunched forward, his face turned so that he could see only the cliff side of the trail. Courage ran in strange patterns, Grant thought. At this moment Fenton was as close to panic as a man could get without giving way to it, yet only a few minutes before he had faced a dozen men, any of them capable of killing him, and he had not shown the slightest sign of fear.

Fenton let his mare take her own pace down the trail, and he was far behind when Grant reached the bottom. Grant waited, rolling a cigarette, his mind on the drive to Placerville. It was nearly noon now, and the morning had turned hot. There had been no rain for weeks, and he wondered if the water-holes on the way to Placerville had dried up. The steers would be all right once they reached the San Miguel, but there were long, dry miles between Rainbow Basin and the river.

Fenton came alongside him, his shoulders back, the hand that had gripped the saddle-horn now swinging at his side. He gave Grant the thin grip of one who knows he has permitted another man to see the naked fear that had knifed into his belly and made a weakling out of him.

"If I never make this ride again," Fenton said, "I'll be just as happy."

"I figured that," Grant said drily, and turned his buckskin toward the Wagon Wheel.

"I've been wondering about Dexter's death." Fenton reined in beside Grant. "I can see how a greenhorn like me might get boogery and do something foolish, but Dexter must have ridden up that trail dozens of times. How come he got killed?"

"I think somebody did it for him," Grant said. "Some day I'll find out, but right now there ain't no proof."

"That why you're hanging around here?" Fenton asked. "From all I hear, you thought a lot of the old man."

"I did, but that ain't the reason I'm hanging on."

"Then why haven't you pulled out? It's pretty damned plain you don't like me and you wouldn't work for me if I bought the Wagon Wheel."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Then why?" Fenton asked doggedly.

Grant was silent for a long moment, his eyes on the ranch buildings and the big cottonwood in front that shaded the house. It was a question he had never answered to anyone, and he knew that Fenton, like Linda, would not understand if he tried to put it into words.

He wondered if Dick Sharples or Curly Tell could have put their tongues to the right words, or even if Joe Dexter could have expressed his feelings if he had been alive. Probably not, Grant thought, for Joe's attitudes had been instinctive.

"I can't tell you so you'd savvy," Grant said finally, and Fenton let it drop at that.

Grant rode with his head down, strange thoughts crowding his mind. He could not even tell Fenton what a ranch was, that it was far more than buildings and corrals and grass and cattle, the things a man could buy. Some outfits were nothing more, but not the Wagon Wheel.

JOE DEXTER had built his spread on the basis of integrity and fair dealing with his neighbors; he had loved it with the sort of passion that a man might love something which was alive. Grant had come to share that passion. Sweat and blood and broken bones, hopes and dreams and ideals—those were the things that had gone into the making of this ranch. Somehow the entire way of life in Rainbow Basin had been built around the Wagon Wheel.

Grant glanced at Fenton who had been coolly watching him. Suddenly stirred by the violence of his thoughts, Grant said harshly, "Fenton, I think I'll kill you before I'll let you buy the Wagon Wheel."

Fenton smiled. "That's tough talk. Why?"

"What you done this morning in High Valley proves a hunch I had from the minute I laid eyes on you in Rocky Fork. You don't believe in nothing that Joe did."

"I'm a business man," Fenton said. "I'll make this outfit pay if I buy it! That wrong?"

"It is the way you mean it. Maybe Joe wasn't no great shakes of a business man, but he was honest and he lived in peace, and he had a way of making everybody else live that way."

"You figure that as long as Mrs. Dexter owns it and you run it, you'll go on like Dexter did?"

"That's right," Grant said. "I told you I couldn't make you savvy."

"I don't," Fenton said. "I don't for a fact."

They had reached the cottonwood. Linda, standing on the front porch, called, "Dinner's almost ready. Come in and wash up."

She was wearing a gingham house dress, white with bold red flowers, the bodice cut so that it made a neat fit across the round swell of her breasts. Her hair was done up in a crown on her head; her ripe lips held that warm, inviting smile she could put on for a man as easily as she wore a garment.

"I'll be right in." Fenton eased out of the saddle and wryly rubbed his seat. "I'll be eating off a high shelf for a few days, Talbot. Don't reckon I'll take that look at the cattle for a few days. Coming in?"

"No. I'll get something to eat in the cook shack and give the boys a hand this afternoon."

He rode on toward the corrals, leading the bay mare, and he thought with a vitriolic burst of bitterness: "If he don't buy the Wagon Wheel, he'll make Linda a lot of promises and he'll marry her and get it for nothing. . . ."

After Grant and Fenton had ridden away, Rennie Johnson did not move from the doorway for a long time, the Winchester held on the ready. She watched Red and Gib Lane and the others until the riders had disappeared up the creek. Then Red swung to face his neighbors, his great shoulders held erect in a way that was unusual for him, his stubble-covered chin thrust defiantly at them.

"You boys never made a mistake taking my orders," he said ominously. "We've made *dinero* when we wanted it, we've had a safe place to live, and we've had the kind of fun we like. Now if any of you ain't satisfied, start your tongue to wagging."

Gib Lane, his clothes still covered with the red dust of the yard, rubbed his face where Red had hit him. He said wickedly, "I ain't satisfied. Not by a hell of a lot. If you figure you can knock me around like you do your own boy—"

"I figure I can," Red broke in. "I let you rake in my *dinero* over your table when I ain't always sure you're dealing square, but when it comes to deciding things, I do it."

"But hell," Lane bawled, "Bugeye was right! No reason why we couldn't have plugged both of 'em."

"Plenty of reason!" Red shouted back. "If you had a brain instead of a custard pudding between your ears, you'd savvy. Linda Dexter knows where the huckleberries went. If they didn't show up, she'd get Steve Ollard in here pronto."

"We could have hid their carcasses so they'd never have been found," Lane said truculently.

"But we'd have Ollard on our necks," Red said. "That's something we don't want. There'll be time to do something if Fenton buys the Wagon Wheel, which maybe he won't. This is one place where we can sleep without holding one eye open. I aim to keep it that way."

"Sure," one of the men said, "sure," and wheeling, walked to his horse and mounted.

The rest followed, all but Lane who stood there, facing Red and hating him with the virulence of his kind. When the sound of hoofs died, Red said, "If you're hankering to make a try, get at it."

"Not today," Lane said. "I'm thinking about the girl. I've mentioned it before. I'll buy her."

"You ain't got enough *dinero*," Red said. "She belongs to Bugeye."

"She needs a man, not a kid. I want a woman—"

"Go get one. Now vamose."

NEXT ISSUE

STAMPEDE TO FREEWATER

An Exciting Range Yarn

By Francis H. Ames

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER XII

Defiance

LANE made a slow turn, pausing for a moment to stare hungrily at Rennie, an expression in his eyes that sent prickles down her spine. Then he moved to his horse in the strange, slinking way he had. Rennie watched him, the barrel of the Winchester pointed at him until he lifted himself into leather.

He was a keg of a man on short legs, a keg filled with evil, and she was afraid of him in a way she had never been afraid of Bugeye. She could handle Bugeye, for he was still more boy than man, but she knew she could not handle Gib Lane if he ever surprised her when she was alone.

Red remained motionless until Lane had gone, then Rennie walked toward him. She said tonelessly, "That's why I can't stay here, Red. It's why I wanted Grant to get me out of here."

"Gib won't bother you," Red said. "I'll kill him if he does, and he knows it."

"That wouldn't help me!" she cried.

"I tell you he won't never lay a hand on you," Red said. "Now go get dinner. I've got business with Bugeye."

She went into the cabin, not wanting to see the licking Red would give Bugeye. She wondered how long the boy would take the beatings his father gave him. Bugeye had the feelings and pride of a man, and he was as tall as Red if not as thick of body. There would come a day when he would use a gun rather than submit, and if he killed Red, the only protection she had would be gone.

She built a fire in the coal stove and sliced venison; she made biscuits and set the coffee pot on the front of the stove and started the meat frying, hearing the sound of fists on flesh, the grunts and curses of

violently angry men. When she looked out, he saw that Bugeye was down and Red was kicking him in the ribs.

"Any pup I raise toes the mark!" Red shouted with the white-hot anger he always showed when he licked the boy. "If you ever get to be man enough to handle me, you can clear out. Until you are, you'll mind. Hear me?"

Rennie turned back to the stove, sickened. She could not understand Red. The way he had raised her proved that he had a streak of decency in him, decency that controlled him even when he was drunk. In all other ways he was like the rest of the High Valley men. He took great pride in rodding the tough bunch that lived in the valley, but he could be king only as long as he maintained his position with his fists and his gun. She had seen him kill a man who had defied him. It would have taken little to have made him kill Gib Lane this morning, and she was sure Lane knew it.

Red came in, his shirt wet with sweat, and there was a dark bruise under one eye. Bugeye had hit him once. It was the first time that had happened.

"The kid ain't hungry," Red said as he sat down at the table. "We won't wait for him."

Rennie placed food on the table and sat down across from him. She forced herself to eat, knowing that Red would ask what was the matter with her if she didn't. When he was done, he sat back contentedly, and gnawed off a chew of tobacco from a frayed plug.

She leaned forward. "Red, what would happen to me if you got killed?"

He scratched an ear, frowning. "Hell, that ain't going to happen. I like living."

"But if it did?"

"I reckon I ain't going to live forever," he said, as if the thought was new to him. "Well, I guess you'd have to light out for the Wagon Wheel. Grant Talbot would look out for you."

"I want to go today," she breathed.

"I ain't dead yet," he snapped. "What's got into you?"

"You talk about me marrying Bugeye," she cried, "but I'd kill him first. You know that, don't you?"

He laughed. "I believe you'd try." He sobered, his face showing a bitterness that was unusual in him. "Funny thing. I raised my own pup who turned out to be a sniveling lap dog instead of a wolf, and I raised you who ain't no kin to me and you turned out to be a wildcat."

"Let me go, Red."

"You're marrying Bugeye," he said roughly. "I've waited a long time for it. Well, you're eighteen next week, old enough to get married."

HE ROSE and stalked out, leaving her staring after him. She whispered, "I'll go tonight."

She got up and cleared the table, expecting to hear Red ride away, but there was no sound of horses, and, when she glanced out, she saw that he was hunkered in the yard, repairing a bridle. Bugeye sat with his back to the log wall of the barn, whittling on a piece of pine.

Rennie washed and dried the dishes and was hanging up her dishcloth when she heard a horse coming down the creek. Her first thought was that it might be Grant, and she took the Winchester down from the antlers on the wall. When she stepped to the door, she saw that the visitor was Bruce Mayer.

She had seen Mayer once when he had come with Joe Dexter and Grant, and she knew that he had killed Dexter. Bugeye had seen it from the rim. She had wanted to tell Grant, but the only chance she'd had was the night before when she had been alone with him, and she had not thought about it then.

Both Red and Bugeye were on their feet, and Red had his gun out. He said, "Get out of here, Mayer. I'd rather have a sidewinder around than a doublecrosser like you."

Mayer reined up, surprised. "I never doublecrossed nobody. What're you driving at?"

"You beefed Dexter," Red said. "If Steve Ollard was worth a damn, he'd have hung you before now."

"I didn't—"

"No use lying. Just get out of here."

Mayer shifted in his saddle. "I ain't riding for the Wagon Wheel. I've got something to say you'd better listen to."

"'Bout time you quit riding for the Wagon Wheel," Red said contemptuously. "I figured old Joe's ghost would have run you out of the basin a long time ago."

Mayer took off his Stetson and wiped his bald head. He was in his middle thirties, Rennie judged, but now with his hat off he looked years older. He seemed to shrink in size under Red's scornful stare, yet he continued doggedly to work at the job he had come here to do.

"I signed on with Mamie Dolan," he said, "but before I left the Wagon Wheel, I heard what Fenton aims to do. He's gonna clean High Valley out."

"Big talk for a greenhorn . . ." Bugeye began.

Red wheeled on him. "Ain't I learned you nothing this morning? Shut up."

Bugeye stepped back, his battered face filled with a cold and bitter rage. He put a hand on gun-butt, trying hard to meet Red's eyes, but in the end he failed and lowered his gaze.

"It ain't big talk," Mayer went on. "It's a proposition of you wiping out the Wagon Wheel, or come spring the Wagon Wheel will run every damned one of you over the hill."

Red brought his eyes back to Mayer. "So Mamie wants us to go down into the basin and raid the Wagon Wheel. She wants us to do what she ain't big enough to do. That it?"

"She's going to be big," Mayer said, "but that ain't the point. She allows you're both on the same side, so it's just smart to work together. She'll pay you five hundred dollars to hit the Wagon Wheel. She'll fix it so the crew's gone. She wants the buildings burned. It'll bust the Dexter woman, owing as much *dinero* to Ira Connors as she does."

"Five hundred dollars." Red threw back his head and laughed. "She takes us for a bunch of chowder-headed fools for sure. Tell her to do her own dirty work. We'll handle Fenton when the sign's right."

"Then you'll do it alone," Mayer said. "Seems to me it's smarter to hit the other fellow a lick before he hits you. Me'n Piper will ride with you if you want to take Mamie's proposition."

"I wouldn't ride to hell with you!" Red shouted. "Go on—get out of here! I've got a good notion to slope into town and tell Ollard you beefed Dexter. I always allowed I was purty ornery. Alongside you I'm a saint."

MAYER slapped his hat on his head and, wheeling his horse, rode back up the trail. Then Red, turning, saw that Bugeye had saddled his sorrel and had mounted.

"Where you going?" Red demanded.

"Riding," the kid said sullenly. He had his hand on gun-butt again, and he was staring at his father with a violence that Rennie had never seen in his face before. "You ain't never going to lay a hand on me again. I'm pulling out."

"You'll come back when you get hungry," Red said.

"I ain't figuring on getting hungry. You've made your living off other folks. I aim to do the same, and while I'm at it, I'll fill Talbot's guts full of lead."

Concern was in Red's face then. He said in a softer voice than he usually used with the boy, "I've had plans for you and I never gave you a licking that wasn't for your own good. I'm wanted by the law in three states, but you ain't. Don't spoil what I've done for you."

"I'm aiming to spoil a lot of things!" Bugeye shouted. "You've kicked me around like a hound pup as long as I can remember. I tell you, you've done it for the last time."

Cracking steel to his horse, Bugeye whirled the animal upstream and rode after Mayer, the animal laboring up the grade.

Red yelled after him, "Slow up, you damned fool! I've taught you how to handle a horse if I never taught you nothing else."

But Bugeye didn't stop or look back.

Red went back to his bridle. He worked on it a moment, then slammed it down in a fit of temper. He caught his black gelding and saddled him. Rennie still stood in the doorway, the Winchester in her hands. As Red mounted and turned toward the house, she slipped back into the kitchen, replaced the rifle on the antlers and ran into the pantry.

When Red came in, she was sifting flour into a pan.

Red took a whiskey bottle down from a shelf back of the stove, calling, "Rennie!"

She stepped out of the pantry, the flour sifter still in her hand. "What do you want?"

Red took a long pull from the bottle. He wiped his mouth and set the bottle back on the shelf. He stared at Rennie a moment as if trying to gauge her temper, and for the first time in her life she sensed that he was worried. He had never been a man to be concerned about the future. With him each day was to be lived when it came, confident that he could handle anything it brought to him, but now she realized he was worried about Bugeye, his only son.

"I've been more'n fair with you," Red said as if his own thoughts had put him on the defensive. "I've raised you like you was my own kin, and you ain't no relation to me at all."

"I've earned my keep," she shot back with righteous anger.

He glowered at her, thumbs hooked inside his belt. "Soon as Bugeye gets back, we're riding into town and you're marrying him so everything will be fit and proper. You and him won't have no trouble dodging the law like I have. You'll live in the basin and Bugeye will make you a good husband or I'll beat hell out of him."

"You're done beating him," she said. "I heard him tell you so."

"Kid talk," Red said loudly, too loudly. "I tell you I've got it planned."

She came toward him, the flour sifter still clutched in her hand. "Who were my folks, Red? I've got a right to know."

"I reckon you have," he said. "I'll tell you on your wedding night."

CHAPTER XIII

Escape

HE STALKED out and mounted. Moving over to the doorway, Rennie watched Red until he disappeared, riding downstream toward Gib Lane's place. She went back into the pantry and set the flour sifter on the counter. There was no sense in baking a cake. She'd just be leaving it for them to eat.

She remembered the broken ax handle that Bugeye had dropped behind the stove a day or two before. She picked it up, knowing that Red would not be back for hours, but she wasn't sure about Bugeye. He might return when he cooled off. Then she thought with a sudden flare of anger that she would probably never know who her folks were, not if Red was going to tell her the night she married Bugeye.

She went into her lean-to room and stood staring at her bunk, at the clothes she would never wear again, man clothes that she hated.

There was no horse in the corral and it was a long walk to the Wagon Wheel. She would have to take the Winchester. It would be a burden, but she could not afford to be unarmed. If Bugeye returned and found her gone, he would guess where she had gone and catch her before she got to the Wagon Wheel.

Kneeling beside her bunk, she reached under it and brought out a small cardboard box. She opened it, fingering the few childhood treasures she had collected through the years—a rag doll, a whistle, some colored stones she had found along the creek, and a locket with a fine gold chain.

She opened the locket and looked at the picture of a young woman. It was her mother, she thought, although Red had never said so. The locket was the only

thing she had that went back to her childhood. She must have been wearing it when the man had taken her to Red that night.

Closing the locket, she put the chain around her neck, fumbling with it a moment before she could fasten it. She seldom looked at it because it reminded her of those nightmarish hours, of the fighting and the gunfire and the sight of dead men on the floor of the ranchhouse, then the long ride.

She closed her eyes, fighting against the panic that threatened to sweep through her. It was always this way when she let herself remember it, but now it was worse because she was leaving the only security she had ever known, and she told herself she was foolish to count on Grant Talbot when he had already told her he couldn't help her. Foolish or not, it was the only thing she could do.

Rennie had never seen Linda Dexter, but she had heard about her. Nothing good, but Red and Bugeye might be wrong. They were never able to see anything good in a decent woman, and Linda must be decent, or Joe Dexter wouldn't have married her.

She heard the jingle of spurs, then Bugeye's strident voice.

"Rennie!"

She grabbed the ax handle and jumped up, holding it behind her. There was no chance to reach the Winchester in the kitchen. She struggled for breath. Her stomach seemed to be pressing against her lungs. Sweat broke through her skin; she stood motionless, trembling, hoping that Bugeye would go away and knowing he wouldn't. He must have seen that her door was open. He came across the kitchen and stood looking at her, grinning with the one good side of his mouth that had not been bruised by Red's fist.

"Hiding, were you?" Bugeye asked. "Well, it won't do you no good."

She knew what he meant to do, what he had wanted to do for a long time. She whispered, "Leave me alone. Red will kill you if you touch me."

He laughed. "I'm thinking maybe I'll kill him first. It'd take a killing to get square for the rawhidings he's given me."

"Let me alone!" she whispered again. "He said we were going into Rocky Fork and get married when you get back."

Bugeye snorted derisively. "Hell, I'm done waiting."

HE TOOK a step toward her, his protruding green eyes crazy with passion. She cried out, "Bugeye, who were my folks?"

He stopped, surprised that she would ask such a question at a time like this. He said, "Find out from Dad. He's spent half his life talking about plans he's never made stick." He laughed. "Yeah, big plans about you and me and the Wagon Wheel. To hell with 'em! I caught up with Mayer before he got out of the valley. I made a deal with him, and I reckon me'n Gib Lane can do the job. Maybe with Piper's and Mayor's help. But you ain't so smart, trying to get me off the track."

He came on, still walking slowly, the words flowing out of him.

"You've hit me too many times, and Dad always kept me from doing anything back. I wasn't no son to him. Just somebody to kick around. That's all I ever have been."

Bugeye was a step from her then, big hands reaching for her. She stepped quickly to one side, and he swore and lunged at her. She swung the ax handle, hitting him on the head with all the strength that was in her body. He raised a hand to ward off the blow, but he was too late. The club made a sharp crack when it hit him, and he spilled forward, his mouth gaping open. She had to jump aside to avoid being caught under him as he fell.

She thought, "He was crazy or he'd have guessed why I had my hands behind me."

For a moment she stood staring at his body. She dug a toe into his ribs, but there was no movement. Stooping, she jerked his gun from holster and ran out of the room. She slipped the Colt under her waistband and fled from the house. Bugeye's sorrel was not more than a dozen paces from the kitchen door, the reins on

the ground.

She grabbed the reins and swung into the saddle. She kicked the horse in his sides, wanting only to get away before Bugeye came to. Then the thought struck her that she might have killed him. She couldn't go back to see. She brought the sorrel into a run, up the trail that Bugeye had followed when he had ridden after Mayer. This was the moment she had thought about for a long time, but she had not foreseen it would be like this. She wished she knew whether Bugeye was alive.

Presently she realized that this was foolish, and pulled the sorrel down to a slower pace. He was already gummed with lather from the ride Bugeye had taken. Rennie looked back once, but the trail had turned toward the rim and the timber blotted out the view of the cabin. She did not know why she had looked back. She never wanted to see the cabin again.

She reached the rim and drew up to let the sorrel blow. She sat her saddle, listening, but hearing nothing except the faint sound of the wind in the pines behind her. For a moment she sat with her eyes closed, trying to shut out the picture of Bugeye lying on the floor of her room, and the thought crowded into her mind that she was doomed to trouble all of her life. She could never expect peace and decency and the kind of life that other women had.

The afternoon sun beat down upon her. She opened her eyes and shook her head, and thought of Grant Talbot. She would know how it was the first minute she saw him and told him what had happened. Then it occurred to her that she had information to offer him about Mayer's visit and what Bugeye aimed to do.

He would help her. He'd have to now. She clung to that hope as she rode down the narrow, twisting trail to the floor of the basin. . . .

THE SUN was a scarlet arc behind the Big Bears when Grant and the crew rode into the Wagon Wheel yard, their long shadows moving before them. The heat of the day was gone; the night would be clear, and cold enough to produce a film of ice on the horse troughs.

What the weather would be tomorrow was anyone's guess, but Grant didn't worry about it. With luck the gather would be finished in two more days and they could start the drive to Placerville. If their luck held, the steers would be delivered with time to spare.

Perhaps it was just getting back into the saddle and combing the aspens for a few reluctant mossyhorns that had a way of hiding out under a man's nose. Or perhaps it was being with the crew again and away from Cole Fenton, but whatever the reason, Grant was more optimistic than he had been for days. Getting rid of Bruce Mayer had helped, too. The man's rawhiding had got under Grant's skin more than he had realized.

They dismounted, Dick Sharples saying, "I'm hungry enough to enjoy even Dutch's cooking."

And young Kit Bellew, "Me, too. Maybe his biscuits won't be so damned hard. Some ornery son put a rock on the plate last night and I had it buttered before I figured out it wasn't a biscuit."

It was natural talk, easy and good. There hadn't been much of it since Joe had died, and suddenly it seemed to Grant that these three months had been an eternity, three months when nothing had been right. Mamie Dolan had called it when she'd said that Joe's death had produced a vacuum, a vacuum of uncertainty that had been hard on all of them.

Then the good feeling was gone from Grant, for Dick Sharples asked, "Where'd that sorrel in the corral come from?"

Grant wheeled to look at the animal. It was Bugeye's horse. For a moment Grant stood motionless, trying to make some sense out of this. Bugeye wasn't in sight. He might be in the barn, holding a gun on Grant. No, that was crazy. He wouldn't be here alone. Or if he had come to square accounts with Grant, he wouldn't have pulled the gear off his horse and turned him into the corral.

"He's Bugeye Johnson's sorrel," Grant said in a low voice, handing the reins of

his buckskin to Sharples. "I'd better have a look around."

"Grant."

It was Rennie, standing with her slim back pressed against the trunk of the big cottonwood. Grant had not noticed her before. She must have been on the other side of the tree, or in the house.

"It's the Johnson girl," Grant said, relieved. "Reckon she rode down on Bug-eye's horse."

Sharples stared at Rennie, his eyes bulging in the way of a man who is seeing something come alive out of his past. He breathed, "Who did you say she was?"

"Rennie Johnson," Grant said. "Red's girl. I'll see what she wants."

He strode toward the cottonwood, knowing what she wanted and wondering what he would do about it. Linda wouldn't stand for the girl staying. With her it was simply a case of not wanting another woman around. It was typical of Linda, Grant thought. Well, Rennie would have to stay the night. Tomorrow would be time enough to decide what to do with her.

When Grant came up to Rennie, he saw that she was frightened. He started to tell her that she had no business coming here, not after what he had told her, but he didn't say it. He couldn't. Something had happened, something that had forced her to come to him because she had no one else to turn to.

RENNIE'S Stetson was dangling down her back from the chin strap, the last of the sunlight on her tanned face. She did not move from where she stood against the tree trunk. She just looked at him, anxiety squeezing her chest so that breathing was an effort for her.

"What is it, Rennie?" he asked.

"I had to come." She touched dry lips with her tongue. I—I didn't have any other place to go." Then she fainted.

He caught her before she fell. He had not realized how small she was until she

[*Turn page*]

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was in his arms. She was like a child, he thought, homeless and scared, and as he carried her into the house he realized that Red and Bugeye would come after her and the trouble he had been striving to avert would be at hand.

Linda came into the living room when she heard Grant. Fenton was a step behind her. Grant laid Rennie on the leather couch, saying over his shoulder, "She'll be all right in a minute. Just fainted."

Tight-lipped, Linda said, "I won't have her here."

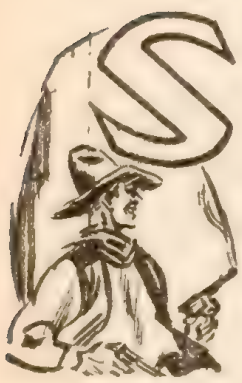
Turning, Grant looked at her, sensing the anger that was in her. She had, he thought, the smallest soul of anyone he had ever known. He said, "You'll have her."

"No I won't," Linda snapped. "She came here this afternoon asking for you. I told her you weren't here and I wouldn't let her in the house. She waited outside. That's where she belongs. Now get her out of here."

There was a satisfied smirk on Fenton's face. "She's right, Talbot. We have no room in Rainbow Basin for High Valley trash."

CHAPTER XIV

At Sundown



STEADILY Grant kept his eyes on Linda.

He said to her, "Joe made one mistake when he married you. He made a hell of a bigger one when he left the Wagon Wheel to you. I've taken your orders, figuring that Joe would have wanted it that way. Now I know better."

"You'll go on taking my orders," Linda flared, "or I'll fire you."

"No," Grant said. "I've been afraid you would. That's what's been the whole damned trouble. I ain't afraid now because I'm going to start giving you orders. If Joe knew you'd kept Rennie outside all afternoon, he'd come out of his grave a-kicking. He never turned nobody away from his house and you ain't starting now."

Fenton reared back, his chin jutting forward defiantly. "You're getting out of line, Talbot."

"You're damned right I am. Now shut up."

"Grant." Rennie was tugging at his arm. "Grant, where am I?"

"Wagon Wheel," he said without turning. "You're all right, Rennie."

Rennie was sitting up, her eyes wide as she stared around the room. "I've been here before, Grant, but I don't remember when. This couch and that table. The picture up there on the wall." She put a hand to her head as if trying to think. "I've seen them before. I just can't remember when it was."

"Get her out of here!" Linda screamed.

"Shut up or I'll put you across my knee," Grant said. "And I ain't stuttering when I tell you. I'll pound some sense into you if that's where your brain is."

Linda's face was ugly. He had never seen her like this before. He wondered how many times Joe had, and he understood then what she had done to the old man. But Joe had never been one to let others share his unhappiness or help him bear the weight of his mistakes.

"You'd be better off without Talbot," Fenton said. "I know how much you've depended on him, Mrs. Dexter, but when a hired hand starts giving orders to his—"

"Fenton, I told you once to keep your mug shut," Grant said in a low voice. "You open it once more, and I'll throw you out of here."

"You're fired!" Linda cried.

"Fire me, and you'll walk out of here without nothing but the clothes on your back. You want some *dinero* for the Wagon Wheel. All right. Leave me alone and I'll get it for you."

Rennie was on her feet now, a hand gripping Grant's arm. She said, "It doesn't make any difference where I saw these things. I've got something to tell you.

It's one reason I came."

Still watching Fenton, Grant asked, "What is it?"

"Atfer you and Fenton left the valley, Bruce Mayer showed up. He said Mamie would give Red and the others five hundred dollars if they'd raid the Wagon Wheel and burn the buildings. Mayer's working for Mamie. He and Piper were going to ride with them."

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard!" Fenton burst out. "This girl is making it up."

A suspicion that had been nothing more than a nagging thought in the back of Grant's mind now began taking shape. He asked softly, "What did Red say?"

"He didn't want any part of it, but Bugeye rode after Mayer and talked to him. Bugeye came back after Red left. He said he'd taken the job and Gib Lane would be with him. He said the four of them would be enough."

There was a strained look in Fenton's face, the look of a man who is seeing something break up in front of him, something he had counted on.

He shouted, "Mrs. Dexter, I was in High Valley this morning. Those men are riff-raff! Cowards, hiding out up there. They don't have enough sand in their craw to try anything like that. I don't know why this girl is saying what she has said, but she must have her own reasons."

"Of course she has," Linda said harshly. "She wants you, Grant. All right, take her and get out."

"If I do, the crew will go with me," Grant said, "and you'll be left up the creek with nothing but a leaky paddle. Can't you see that's what Fenton and Mamie want?"

"Hogwash," Fenton snorted.

GRANT pulled Rennie's hand away from his arm and moved toward Fenton.

"This whole business has looked funny to me from the start. Now it makes sense. Mamie sent for you to talk Linda into selling. You went up to High Valley and talked tough to Red so his bunch would be mad enough to listen to Mayer. Then when our buildings were burned and the herd scattered to hellangone, Linda would be so scared she'd take any penny ante offer you made."

"The girl just said Johnson wouldn't listen!" Fenton shouted.

"But Bugeye did. You're finished, Fenton. Get out."

Linda jumped at Grant, slapping him across the face, her left hand grabbing his gun arm. He shoved her aside. Then Rennie was on Linda, biting and gouging and yanking at her hair. If it had not been for her interference, Grant would have been a dead man. Fenton had yanked out his gun, his face livid with fury.

Grant grabbed Fenton's right wrist as the gun swung out of the man's shoulder holster. He twisted until the gun fell to the floor, then he hit Fenton on the jaw and knocked him flat on his back.

Grant heard Linda swearing at him, but he didn't look at her. Rennie would keep her out of it. Fenton had been dazed by the blow. He started to get up, shaking his head, but before he could struggle to his feet, Grant had him by the coat collar and the seat of his pants. He carried Fenton, kicking and squirming and cursing, to the door and heaved him into the yard. Fenton fell on his belly and scooted like a sled, his face in the deep red dust of the yard.

"Dick!" Grant called.

Sharples came out of the cook shack on the run, Curly Tell and Kit Bellew and the others behind him. Grant said, "Fenton's pulling his freight. Get him a horse and start him out. If he makes a kick, slap hell out of him."

Sharples grinned. "It's a chore I'll plumb enjoy. I sure will."

"There's something up," Grant said. "Curly, you and Kit finish your supper and get back to the herd. If you need help, start shooting. We can't let nobody scatter them steers now or we're licked."

Nodding, Tell swung back to the cook shack with Kit Bellew. Grant wheeled into the house. Linda was sitting on the

floor, whimpering. Her face was streaked with scratches; her hair was a tangled mess. She stared up at Grant and began to swear.

"There's one lady in the house," Grant said, "and it ain't you. Shut up."

He pulled Linda to her feet and pushed her down on the couch.

Rennie said apologetically, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Dexter, but Fenton would have killed Grant if I hadn't got you off his arm."

"I wish to hell he had!" Linda screamed.

Grant stood in front of her, looking at her and thinking of the night before when he had kissed her. He could not understand why he had done it and he never would. He must, he thought, have known how utterly worthless she was, that every thought and desire she'd ever had centered on herself.

"You're right about one thing," Grant said. "You don't belong here. I'll buy you out and you can get the hell off this range and we'll both be satisfied."

"Where would you get fifty thousand?" Linda demanded.

"It won't be fifty thousand," Grant answered. "You'll take my note for what I can't raise, but you'll get something. That's more'n you'd get if I'd let this go the way you wanted to."

She began to cry, the violence of her anger spent.

Rennie said, "There's something else, Grant. Bruce Mayer killed Joe."

HE TURNED to her, taking a moment to understand the full implication of what she had said. He asked, "How do you know?"

"Bugeye saw it from the rim. Joe had been in High Valley and was on his way down. Mayer was halfway up, blocking the trail. Joe got off his horse and they had a fight. Bugeye was too far away to hear what they said, but he saw Mayer throw Joe over the edge."

"Why didn't Red tell me?" Grant demanded. "Or go to Steve Ollard?"

"You know why. Red don't want to get tangled up with the law, but he threatened to today when Mayer was talking about this deal with Mamie."

Grant sat down, his head pounding, weariness bringing a slackness to his muscles. This was something he had guessed, but he had not suspected that Mayer was the killer. Now, knowing that the man worked for Mamie, he could understand how it had been.

There was this moment of silence, the only sound in the room that of Linda's sobbing. Then the drum of a galloping horse came to them. Grant said more to himself than to the women, "Fenton will go to Mamie now. We'll have hell to pay before morning."

Sharples came in. "He's on his way, Grant." He walked to where Rennie stood at the end of the couch and gave her a long, studying stare. He asked, "You Red Johnson's daughter?"

"No," Rennie answered. "He raised me. That's all. I don't know who my folks were."

Sharples scratched his cheek. "You're the spit'n image of someone I used to know. Don't make sense, though. Got anything from where you came from, or do you remember where it was?"

"I was too little to remember anything. I think my mother died when I was a baby. I know there was a fight and some men were killed and I was carried off. They took me to Red and he kept me."

Sharples shook his head as if there was something in his mind he could not believe. "It just don't make sense. I must be getting old and foolish."

"What's biting you?" Grant asked.

"No use getting everybody worked up on account of a crazy notion I've got." He glanced at the picture on the wall. "I'll go see Red. He's the only one who'd know."

There was no use pressing Sharples. The old man would not talk until he was ready.

Grant said, "I'm riding into town tonight. Dick, you stay with Linda. Don't let her get away, and keep your eyes open for trouble. It might bust open before I

get back."

"You'd better keep me here," Linda said bitterly. "When I get to the sheriff, I'll have you and this little devil in jail, and I'll keep you there till you rot! You hear?"

"I ain't deaf." Grant nodded at Sharples. "Think you can handle her?"

"I may have to hogtie her," Sharples said, "but I'll handle her all right."

Grant moved to the door. He paused, looking back at Rennie. "Did you come down just to tell me about Mayer and what they had cooked up?"

"No. I had to get out. Red was taking me to town to marry Bugeye, but Bugeye came back when Red was gone. I hit him. Maybe I killed him. I don't know."

Grant understood then. He had been about to ask her to go to town with him, but she had been through too much. She was better off here. He said, "Thanks, Rennie."

"I didn't aim to stir up so much trouble," Rennie said, "but I thought it was a fair trade, you giving me a place to stay for telling you."

"More'n fair," Grant said. "Take care of Rennie, too, Rick. I'll get back as soon as I can."

He went out into the dusk. He caught and saddled a leggy roan, leaving his buckskin in the corral, and took the road to town.

CHAPTER XV

Gambler and—Fraud

IT WAS nearly ten when Grant reached Rocky Fork. Main Street was quiet, the only lights in the hotel lobby and the Silver Dollar. Grant had hoped to catch Marty Reem before he left the store. Ordinarily Reem closed at eight, but he often spent several hours working on his books or stocking the shelves. He had no help now, so he tended to chores like that in the evenings after he closed.

But there was no light in the back of the store. Grant rode on to the end of the block and turned right along a side street to Reem's house.

Again Grant felt the rub of irritation. The house was dark. If Reem was asleep he might not be in any mood to listen, but Grant had no choice. Dismounting, he went up the path and knocked at the door. When there was no answer, he knocked again, hammering the door this time, and a moment later a light came to life in the bedroom.

Reem poked his bald head through an open window, saying in a sleep-thick voice, "The store's closed and it stays closed till morning."

"Sorry to wake you up, Marty," Grant said, "but I've got to talk to you."

It took a moment for Reem's sleep-fogged mind to recognize Grant's voice. Then he asked worriedly, "What's wrong, Grant?"

"Trouble. A hell of a lot of it, and I'm counting on you to help."

Reem pulled his head in and quickly opened the front door, the lamp in his hand. He said, "Come in, boy. I don't usually go to bed this early, but I was up most of last night talking to Ira and Steve."

Reem stepped aside for Grant to come in. He had nothing on but his underclothes, a comical-appearing, pudgy man, his belly making a round little ball beneath his undershirt. Grant sat down on the horsehair sofa and glanced around the tidy room, thinking as he always did when he was here that Marty Reem was a better housekeeper than most women. He lived alone and he had no kin, so the wreath on the wall always struck Grant as being ridiculous. Inside the wreath were the words, "God Bless Our Home."

Reem dropped into a rocking chair. "Let's have it, Grant."

"What was the palaver with Steve and Ira about?"

Reem scowled. "It's a damned nasty

world, Grant. Sometimes I'm ashamed of being a man, and I get to wondering if God ain't ashamed of Himself for having created us. He must get mighty disgusted when He looks down at the world and considers the ornery things we do."

Grant rolled a smoke, sensing the corroding bitterness that was in the little storekeeper. He said, "You ain't answered my question."

"I'm getting to it. What I'm saying is that everybody is so damned selfish we can't see straight." He paused, frowning. "Well, I don't mean everybody. That's what strikes me as being funny about the whole thing. When Joe was alive this basin was a right pleasant place to live in. He kept it that way without even trying because he wasn't selfish. Or maybe he was. Maybe he got his pleasure out of life just by living that way."

It was a long speech for Marty Reem who ordinarily was no philosopher at all. Grant, not knowing what to say, was silent. He fished a match out of his vest pocket, fired his cigarette, and waited for the storekeeper to go on.

"I keep thinking about what you said yesterday," Reem said. "There's a lot of sense in your notion about keeping the Wagon Wheel like it was. It would be, with you running it. In time you'd be elected president of the cattlemen's association and you'd be wearing Joe's boots without ever remembering when you'd pulled 'em on. There's a lot of Joe in you."

"You said we was all selfish," Grant murmured. "I reckon you're right. The Wagon Wheel means a home and job to me. I don't want to lose neither one."

REEM nodded. "The point is it'd be better for all of us if you didn't lose 'em. I mean, looking at it from the selfish point of view. I had the notion me and Ira and Steve would form a company and put up the money it'd take to buy the Wagon Wheel. We'd keep you and the crew on, but we'd sure get rid of Linda. I still think it was a good notion."

"They couldn't see it?"

"Hell no. Steve wants to go along without no trouble and Ira figures he'll get the Wagon Wheel without it costing him anything. Wouldn't surprise me if he hired some men to scatter your herd so you couldn't get to Placerville and pay him off."

"I'll cut the old buzzard's heart out if he tries it," Grant growled.

"Then Steve will hang you on the first limb he finds." Reem rose and, walking to the table, filled his pipe from a can of tobacco. He lighted it, eyeing Grant through the clouds of blue smoke. "Well, what fetched you here?"

Grant told him what had happened and about Mayer killing Joe. Reem rocked steadily, head tipped forward. When Grant finished, Reem said, "It ain't surprising, none of it. We've underestimated Mamie right along, but we shouldn't have, knowing she's been sitting on her front porch living on hate for years."

"What do we do?"

"You've got a man-sized job of fighting to take care of first."

"Sure," Grant said impatiently. "After we do the fighting we've still got Linda on our hands, and we'll wind up in the same place we started from."

"You've got an idea or you wouldn't be here," Reem said.

Grant had finished his cigarette. Now he rolled and fired another, taking his time because he was reluctant to put his idea into words.

"I've got a few hundred dollars in the bank," he said then slowly. "The crew could raise some more, but it won't add up to nothing like enough. I don't know what we could make Linda settle for, but I was hoping you'd put up the rest, whatever it'd be."

Reem rose and knocked out his pipe. "I've got three thousand dollars in cash. It wouldn't be enough."

"Ira would loan you the rest."

"By putting up my store and house," Reem said with a touch of anger. "You expect me to do that?"

"Yeah," Grant said. "That's what I expect."

Reem filled his pipe again and began to pace restlessly around the room. He said, "I'm not young, Grant. It's different with you. Hell, you could get a good job on half a dozen spreads I could name right here in the basin. I'm too old to start over. The store's all I've got."

"Marty, suppose you lost your house and store to Ira." Grant leaned forward. "You'd still have the Wagon Wheel. I'll guarantee that me and the boys would stick with you."

"I ain't a rancher. I'm a storekeeper." Reem pulled hard on his pipe, torn between what he wanted to do and what he was afraid to try. "And if your herd did get scattered and you didn't get to Placerville in time to sell the cows, Ira would pull in the pot."

"There's that chance," Grant agreed. "Me and the crew ain't got nothing much to lose but our lives. There's a good chance some of us will before this is done."

"All right," Reem said reluctantly. "Get back to the Wagon Wheel. I'll roll Ira out of bed and I'll see what I can raise. I'll be out there by sunup."

Grant rose. I'll have it out with Linda. If Fenton hadn't given her his gab about fifty thousand, I could make her listen to reason, but I don't know how it'll be now."

"You ought to stop at Mamie's," Reem said. "She might pull in her horns if she knows what we're fixing to do."

"Won't hurt to tell her," Grant said, "but I've got a hunch she'll play her hand out now that it's gone this far. What about Ollard? Think he'd arrest Mayer?"

"Not on hearsay evidence," Reem answered. "You'd have to get Bugeye to swear to what he saw."

GRANT walked to the door. He paused and grinned at Reem. "It ain't such a damned nasty world, Marty. Not with you in it."

"Go on," Reem said hoarsely. "Get, before I start thinking about what a fool I'm making out of myself. If I wind up with nothing but the Wagon Wheel, I'll work the tail off of you."

Grant left, still grinning. Mounting, he left town at a brisk pace. The sky was clear and star-filled, the air sharp and biting. It would freeze tonight, Grant thought absently. He considered the possibility of Mamie sending Piper and Mayer to stampede the herd tonight. It was her natural move, and it would leave the Wagon Wheel wide open for days while the steers were gathered again.

But luck was not all on Mamie's side. Grant had foreseen the danger, and he thought he could depend on Curly Tell and Kit Bellew holding the steers in the pasture at the upper end of the basin.

As Grant rode, he considered Reem's suggestion that he see Mamie tonight. It would not take him far out of his way and it would mean only a few minutes wasted. He weighed those minutes against the chance that he could make Mamie change her mind, and decided it was worth a try.

Mamie was a hard-headed gambler. It was quite possible she would size the situation up realistically and decide to save what she could. It was wishful thinking, and Grant was fully aware of that. More than that, he might run into a slug if Piper, Fenton, and Mayer were with her, but he doubted that they would be.

When Grant reached the forks in the road, he saw that there was a light in Mamie's house. He reined up, listening, but he could hear nothing except the coyote chorus from the rim above her place. He rode on up the steep slope, one hand on gun-butt, eyes on the trail.

In spite of himself a faint prickle of uneasiness ran down his spine. He fought the temptation to turn back, telling himself that he was allowing imaginary fears to get the best of him. Logic told him that only Fenton would be here, that Piper and Mayer would be gone, either to stampede the Wagon Wheel herd or to join Bugeye and Gib Lane in their raid on the ranch.

He stepped down in front of the Seven Bar Seven house and paused, eyes probing the shadows. Still he could not see or

hear anything that seemed out of the way. Mamie's shades were up. He could see the lighted lamp on the table in the living room, but apparently no one was in the room. Mamie might have gone to bed, or possibly she was in her wheel-chair, hidden from his sight by some angle of the wall.

Carefully he walked up the path, his gun riding loosely in leather. He stepped across the porch, boards squealing weirdly under his boots, and knocked on the door. It swung open at once and Mamie stood in front of him.

"Come in," Mamie said cordially. "I had a hunch you'd change your mind about working for me."

He stood motionless, staring at her, shocked by this thing that seemed nothing less than miraculous. He said hoarsely, "I thought you couldn't get out of your chair."

She smiled. "I wanted folks to think that. I'm hard to lick, Grant, even by Joe Dexter. It's taken me a long time, but I'm walking a little now, and it won't be long until I'll be riding." She motioned to him. "Come in."

"I didn't change my mind, Mamie. I stopped to tell you that you're licked. I know about Mayer and how Joe was killed. You done it."

"It was long overdue," she said easily. "Well, come in and tell me how you found out."

CHAPTER XVI

Trapped

ONE step took Grant through the door. He caught the movement of a downswinging gun-barrel and threw up a hand. He was too late. He went down on his knees, exploding stars rolling across his vision, then he toppled forward. He was not entirely unconscious, but he could not move.

From what seemed like a great distance he heard Mamie shout, "Get his gun, Ben!"

Someone yanked his gun from holster. Piper said, "I'll kill him with his own iron, damn him."

"The hell you will!" Mamie screamed. "Let me have it. Now drift, both of you. Get them steers scattered from here to hellangone."

Grant heard the jingle of spurs as men walked out of the house. He lay there for a moment, fighting the aching pain, then he raised himself on his arms. Mamie was in her wheel-chair, his gun lined on him, her face filled with malicious triumph. Fenton was standing beside her. It must have been Mayer and Piper who had left.

"You made a mistake when you turned my offer down," Mamie said with cold venom. "I could have used you."

"You're making a mistake leaving him alive," Fenton said hoarsely. "He knocked me around and threw me out of the house. I ain't going to overlook it if you do."

"I haven't made a mistake yet, Cole," Mamie said. "I ain't making one now."

"You're making a hell of a big one!" Fenton shouted. "He's dangerous as long as he's alive."

"He won't be alive if he makes a wrong move," Mamie said. "I aim for him to see the fire from my porch. Hear that, Grant? From my porch where I've sat for years watching you and Joe and that red-headed floozy he fetched to the basin. It'll be a nice fire, the house and the barn and every damned building on the Wagon Wheel."

Strength went out of Grant's arms and his face hit the floor, pain rocketing through him, and with it was the feeling of utter hopelessness.

Grant realized afterward that he must have passed out then. Because later, when he tried to remember everything that had happened, there was this blank spot that he could not fill. What he did recall was that he was aware first of the hammering ache in his head, then of the flow of talk, and presently the words became intelligible to him. Still he did not

move. He would be overlooked as long as they thought he was out cold.

He had guessed right in thinking that Mamie would try to scatter the herd tonight. Probably it had been part of the agreement with Bugeye. The one thing that would pull the crew away from the Wagon Wheel was a stampede.

Now, with his head feeling as if someone was pounding it with a club at regular intervals, he found it hard to think. He could not be sure what Dick Sharples would do. If he tried to save the herd, there would be only the two women left at the Wagon Wheel ranchhouse. Linda would be no good, and Grant could not bring himself to consider what would happen to Rennie if she was taken back to High Valley.

Then Mamie's words focused Grant's mind on the immediate problem of getting out of here.

She was saying to Fenton, "You'd better start. Know what you're going to tell the Dexter woman?"

"Sure," Fenton answered irritably. "Sometimes you talk like you think I'm a fool."

"Sometimes I think you are. Let me hear what you're going to say."

"If I am a fool, it's because I let you drag me into this crazy scheme of yours," Fenton said bitterly. "Or maybe I'm a fool because I ever thought I wanted to be in the cattle business. My seat's so sore I can't sit a saddle."

"Don't get weak in the britches, not when you're ready to haul in the pot," she said caustically. "What are you going to tell her?"

"I still want to buy Wagon Wheel," he said, parrotlike. "I don't want to lose the cattle, and I overheard Mayer and Piper talking about stampeding the herd."

"Maybe Sharples won't leave," Mamie said uncertainly.

"He'll go if Linda tells him to," he said. "I'll offer to stay with the women. Besides, Sharples will figure on Talbot showing up any minute."

"All right," Mamie said commandingly. "Get moving."

GRANT heard Fenton take two steps, then he stopped, and from the sound of their voices, he knew that Mamie was still directly in front of him, that Fenton had moved toward the door so that Grant lay between them.

"I tell you it's bad business, leaving this hombre alive," Fenton said. "It's like what you said Piper told you. Talbot's got the ghost of old man Dexter in him and you can't win with him still alive."

"I'll plug him," Mamie said coolly, "soon as he sees the fire. I've been promising myself a look at his face and I ain't going to lose my fun. I just wish it was Dexter."

Slowly Grant brought himself up to his knees, the room spinning before him. There was one chance, he thought, a crazy wild chance, but it was the best he could think of. He had to stop Fenton before he left.

"I'll plug him now if—" Fenton began.

"Cole, if you don't make tracks, I'll shoot your ears off."

"Where am I?" Grant asked.

The room had stopped spinning. Grant looked at Mamie who was sitting with the gun on her lap, a cigar in her right hand. She was staring at him curiously.

"He's out of his head," she said. "I hope to hell he comes out of it in time."

"Let me tie him up," Fenton urged.

"No fun hunting a bear after you get a rope on him," Mamie said. "You think I'm helpless?"

Grant came to his feet, a hand raised to his head, eyes on Mamie as if he could not see her clearly. "Linda," he whispered. "Are you Linda?"

He could not see Fenton, but he thought the man was still standing behind him. This had to be done slowly and it had to be done right, and he was fully aware that he was running the risk of having Fenton shoot him in the back.

"No, I ain't Linda," Mamie said. "You're all balled up, Talbot. You won't see Linda again. You can count on that just like you can count on us getting the Wagon Wheel for ten per cent of what it's worth. By sunup she'll be so scared she'll

sell for anything Cole offers her." She motioned to Fenton with her left hand. "I won't tell you again, Cole. Get over to the Wagon Wheel."

Grant started toward Mamie, lurching crazily. "You *are* Linda. You ain't fooling me."

He was close to her now, eyes wide and staring. Frightened now, Mamie screamed, "Hit him on the head again!"

Grant toppled forward and sprawled across her, knocking the wheel-chair over. He rolled onto the floor. He heard the roar of Fenton's gun, but he had not been hit. He scooped up his Colt that Mamie had dropped and lunged away from her as Fenton fired again, the bullet slapping into the floor inches from his hand. It took an instant to turn so that he faced Fenton, a precious instant that gave the man time to fire again, but Fenton was rattled and his shot went wild.

Grant pulled trigger and came on up to his feet. He shot again, then a third time, the room filled with the hammering explosion. Fenton fell to his knees, then to the floor. Grant did not shoot again. He stood there watching Fenton crawl across the room to Mamie, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

Slowly Grant stepped back, holding his gun on Fenton. Mamie was a motionless, grotesque heap on the floor. Then Grant realized what had happened. Fenton's first bullet had killed her.

Fenton reached her and took her hand. He said, "I killed my sister." Turning, he looked at Grant, his long hair disheveled, some of it stringing down over his stricken gray face. "I loved her. She could always make me do what she wanted me to. I—I didn't mean—" The last of his strength fled. His head dropped to the floor and he died that way, still gripping Mamie's hand.

THE Wagon Wheel foreman walked out of the house, out of the room with its smell of death and powdersmoke. He took a deep breath and, removing the empties, thumbed new loads into the cylinder of his gun. So Cole Fenton was Mamie Dolan's brother. These last few minutes had made a good many things clear.

Grant dropped his gun into holster and ran to his horse. He was remembering about Bugeye and Gib Lane, about Piper and Mayer, and time was running out.

He swung into saddle and put his horse down the trail to the creek. He had no idea of time, for he could not tell how long he had been unconscious. He splashed across the creek, seeing the pinpoint of light that marked the Wagon Wheel ranchhouse. For some reason he found reassurance in that light. Nothing had happened yet. There was still time. Perhaps it was not as late as he thought.

A call came to him from his right, a man's voice shouting for help, a note of urgency in it that could not be denied. For a moment Grant fought his indecision. It might be Curly Tell or young Kit Bellew, wounded by Piper or Mayer. The need to get to the Wagon Wheel was not great enough to make him go on without finding out who it was.

As he reined his buckskin off the road he heard the call again. And found a man lying in the grass not far above the creek. Stepping down, he knelt at the fellow's side and struck a match. It was Red Johnson. He was alive, but his face was pale, and his eyes were filled with the knowledge that death was at hand. He had been hit in the chest, the front of his shirt dark with a patch of dried blood.

"Grant," Red breathed. "I'm glad it's you. I heard a horse and I was afraid you'd go on by."

Grant knew he couldn't stay. There was nothing he could do, but Red had his hand, gripping it tightly with the frantic urgency of one who knows he has only minutes left.

"Listen to me," Red whispered. "I never gave no thought to dying before, but I'm thinking now, and I've got to do one decent thing before I die. Rennie is—You listening, Grant?"

"I'm listening."

"Rennie is Joe Dexter's daughter. You hear me?"

For a moment Grant was too shocked to answer. It was incredible; it was unbe-

lievable, but a dying man would not lie.

Red's grip tightened on his hand. "Hear me, Grant?"

"I hear. Can you prove it?"

The grip relaxed. "She's got a birthmark between her shoulder blades. Always had it. Sharples will remember. She's got a locket with her mother's picture, too. Show it to Sharples." Red took a labored breath. "Bugeye shot me. Came to Lane's cabin and talked him into playing Mamie Dolan's game. Rennie was gone, he said. Where is she?"

"Wagon Wheel."

Red struggled for his breath again. "That's where she belongs. Funny how it goes. I kept Bugeye out of trouble so he could get the Wagon Wheel when he married Rennie, and settle down. Figured we'd move in when Rennie was eighteen, but I didn't figure on Joe getting married again. Didn't know what to do after that, but the Wagon Wheel still ought to go to Rennie. Bugeye turned out bad. Didn't give me a chance. Plugged me to get even for the lickings I gave him. Rennie's the one who's good. Funny, ain't it, Grant?"

"Yeah," Grant said. "Funny. Joe didn't know about her?"

"He had his suspicions on account of Rennie looking so much like her mother, but he didn't have any way of knowing. He'd quiz me and I'd laugh in his face. You see Rennie gets the Wagon Wheel, Grant!"

"I'll see to it."

CHAPTER XVII

The Last Ace

RED was so silent for a minute that Grant thought he was gone. He struck another match. Red's eyes were open, and he was smiling as if an inner peace had come to him.

"Yeah, it's funny," he mumbled. "Bugeye's ma died. I was in love with Rennie's mother. Asked her to marry me. She said yes, then she ups and marries Joe. It was in Idaho. Joe didn't know. I was an outlaw. He was a big rancher. I hated him. Blamed him for me losing Rennie's mother. She ran away with another man after Rennie was born, but I still hated Joe."

Grant knew then why Joe had never wanted to talk about the woman whose picture was on the wall. He asked, "How'd you get Rennie?"

"Stole her. Hired some fellers on account of I was hiding out. Joe and Sharples was gone when my men hit Joe's ranch. They killed some of the crew and got Joe's horses. Took five thousand but I made 'em give it to me. I've still got it. In the cabin under the floor. Get it for Rennie, Grant."

"I'll get it."

"We drifted around some. Then I got wind of Joe's leaving Idaho and settling here in the basin. When you're riding the owlhoot, you hear the leaves whisper. I brought my bunch in and we settled in High Valley. We'd knock a bank over or a stage and hightail back to the valley. We was safe long as Ollard let us alone. Got a lot of fun watching Joe ride up there just to look at Rennie, but he never said nothing to her about who she looked like and I wouldn't tell him."

Red was silent again. Grant asked, "They're hitting the Wagon Wheel tonight?"

"'Bout dawn," Red whispered. "Be more'n Bugeye and Lane. Five or six. Bugeye wants to drill you for licking him the other night. Aims to take Rennie back. You take care of her, Grant. She likes you. Make you a good wife." Red was panting now. "St. Peter's going to have one good mark to put in the book—for—me."

The sound of his breathing ceased. When Grant struck another match he saw that Red was gone. He rose and moved to his horse. He stepped into the saddle with the first gray hint of dawn showing in the east, and it struck him that fate had had a strange way of bringing justice to the man who had stolen Joe Dexter's infant daughter.

Grant heard the thunder of hoofs coming in from the north, and he put his horse into a run. It came to him, then, with the cold wind needling his face, that Mamie had been wrong when she had told him he was in love with a ranch. Linda had been wrong, too, in saying he was not a man who wanted what other men wanted. He was in love with Rennie Johnson. No, Rennie Dexter.

When Grant had been a boy, he'd had a nightmare he had never forgotten. He was trapped in a room; there was no escape, and the walls were falling in on him. Now it came back to him as he heard gunfire to the west, somewhere between him and the pasture where the steers were being held. The High Valley bunch was ahead of him. He could not beat them to Wagon Wheel, and the terrible, helpless feeling that had possessed him when he'd had the nightmare was in him again.

The light in the ranchhouse went out. Grant heard Bugeye's shout:

"Come out of there, Rennie! Fetch the Dexter woman with you. We're going to burn every damn building!"

A rifle cracked from the living room. Grant saw the twinkling ribbon of flame. Rennie screamed defiantly, "Come and get us!"

In the pale light Grant could make out the milling horses in front of the house. The gunfire from the west was closer now. Bugeye and Lane and the others dismounted and ran toward the front door. Two Winchesters cracked, and the high scream of a man mortally hit rode the wind.

Someone yelled, "It's Talbot!"

GRANT pulled up and swung down, knowing he would shoot straighter on his feet than on a horse that might be boogered by gunfire. Colt in hand, he raced toward the cluster of men.

Bugeye yelled, "He's my meat!"

Grant held his fire. He saw the burst of powderflame from Bugeye's gun as the others pounded at the barred door. Inside Rennie and someone who was with her were firing their rifles. Grant came on as Bugeye let go with another shot, the slug burning along Grant's ribs like the passage of a white-hot poker.

Riders were coming in from the west. Grant did not look to see who they were. They might be more of the High Valley bunch, or they might be Piper and Mayer. If they were, Grant would be caught in a crossfire. He was close enough now to make his shots count. The door had been smashed open and again a man screamed. The Winchesters inside were still working.

Grant fired from the hip as Bugeye threw a third shot that missed by inches. Bugeye toppled back against the wall and his feet went out from under him like a clumsy pup's on a sheet of ice. Grant let go again and Bugeye spilled over sideward and lay still.

Gib Lane lay flat on his belly on the porch, his gun less than an inch from an outstretched hand. When Bugeye dropped, the rest of them broke for their horses. Dick Sharples bawled, "Throw down your gun!"

One of the High Valley men wheeled and pitched a shot at Grant, and Grant knocked him off his feet with a slug in the chest. The two who were left had had enough. They threw up their hands as the Wagon Wheel crew pulled up in a whirling cloud of red dust, young Kit Bellew yelling, "We got Mayer and Piper, Grant! They tried to stampede the steers, but we held 'em off till Dick and the boys got there."

Grant stood motionless, his gun at his side, smoke twisting from the barrel. He felt a dull ache where Bugeye's bullet had hammered against a rib. He knew that blood was trickling down his side, but it didn't matter. The nightmare was over and the walls had not fallen in on him.

Rennie was there, an arm around him. She cried, "Grant, Grant, are you all right?"

"Just lost some hide along my ribs." He looked down at her pale, anxious face, and he wondered why it had taken him so long to realize how he felt about her. "You ain't hurt?"

"Not a bit."

He swung to Sharples and the others who had ridden up. "Why didn't you stay here, Dick?"

"I left Sam," Sharples answered. "I didn't figure on so many riding in. We heard the shooting and I knew damned well somebody was trying to get them steers to running." He looked at Rennie, grinning a little. "Anyhow, that there girl is worth ten ordinary men."

Then Grant noticed she was wearing a red-flowered dress, one of Linda's that was too big for Rennie. He said stupidly, "You've got a dress on."

"That's right," she said. "I have."

Sharples said, "Somebody else coming. Now who the hell could that be?"

"Don't make me no never mind," Kit Bellew bragged. "Hell, we licked this bunch. We can lick anybody."

"That'll be Marty Reem," Grant said. "Don't know who the other hombre is, but they ain't here for trouble."

THEY waited, facing the east that was aflame now with the sunrise, and presently Reem and Sheriff Steve Ollard rode in. Looking at Ollard, a wild hatred for him rose in Grant. If the lawman had done his job, most of this trouble could have been averted.

"We've got a couple of prisoners, Steve," Grant said in a tough, flat voice. "Likewise some carcasses for you to take to the undertaker. You'll find two more in the Seven Bar Seven house, and you'll find Red Johnson's body on this side of the creek. You're too damned late as usual."

"Red!" Rennie breathed. "He—he's dead?"

"Bugeye shot him," Grant said. "I don't know how he was able to ride this far, but he wanted to tell me who you were. You're Joe's girl."

"I know," she whispered. "Sharples looked at the picture in my locket. It's just like the picture on the wall. He said it was my mother. And he knew about the birthmark on my back."

"Linda know?"

Rennie nodded. "She knows."

Ollard shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. "You don't need to lay no blame on me."

Grant turned from Rennie, and he laid his tongue on the sheriff like a whip. "You've been riding along mighty easy, Steve, on account of what Joe done, but you're lazy and you're no good. Now are you turning your star in, or do I take it away from you?"

Outraged, Ollard bawled, "Who do you think you are? Joe Dexter?"

"Maybe," Grant said. "I told you in town that the thing to do was to make the Wagon Wheel stand for everything Joe made it stand for. That's what I aim to do."

"Take your prisoners, Steve," Marty Reem said. "I think the boy means what he says."

"I ain't turning my star in," Ollard snapped. "I'm going to High Valley and I'll clean it out."

"You're a little slow again," Grant said, "but you might still find some men the law wants. Come spring the Wagon Wheel will be using High Valley for summer range. You can spread the word around." He motioned to Sharples. "Hitch up the wagon and tote these carcasses into town. Come in, Marty."

Turning, Grant walked into the house, his right hand holding Rennie's. He asked, "Where's Linda?"

"Under her bed." Rennie laughed. "I never saw anybody as scared as she is."

The light inside the house was thin. Grant lighted a lamp and turned to Marty. "How did you make out?"

The storekeeper grinned. "Fine. I borrowed ten thousand from Ira. That enough?"

"Plenty. We won't need any of it except what it takes to get Linda off our necks, and we'll pay that back pronto."

Picking up the lamp, he went into Linda's bedroom. He got down on his knees and looked under the bed. He said, "Come out of there."

"I can't," Linda whispered. "I can't move."

"You'll move," he said. Taking her by

the arm, he pulled her out from under the bed and yanked her to her feet. "Fenton's dead. Mamie was his sister. They was figuring on scaring you into taking a small price for the Wagon Wheel. They didn't know about Rennie."

Linda swayed uncertainly, and for a moment Grant thought she was going to faint. She sat down on the bed, looking at Rennie and Marty Reem, and she said with a burst of defiance, "The Wagon Wheel is still mine."

"You done anything to deserve it," Grant demanded, "crawling under a bed when the shooting started?"

"It's still mine," Linda said.

"If we went to law, you wouldn't have nothing," Grant said, "but we don't want to take all that time. You'll take what we give you, or we'll throw you out of here and you won't get nothing."

"I don't want to be—" Rennie began.

Grant motioned for her to be silent. "You're going into town with Marty," he said to Linda, "and he'll get a lawyer. When you sign everything over, Marty will give you five thousand and then you be sure you're on the next stage out of the basin."

LINDA lowered her eyes, the defiance flowing out of her. "All right, Grant."

Grant turned to Rennie. "I'm bleeding a little. Want to patch me up?"

"Of course," Rennie answered.

She followed him out of Linda's bedroom. When he reached the kitchen door, he looked back and saw that she had stopped to look at the picture on the wall. She asked, "Did Red say anything about my mother?"

He hesitated, not wanting her to know what Red had said. He asked, "Dick know anything about her?"

"He thinks she's dead."

"Yeah, she's dead," Grant said, relieved, and went on into the kitchen.

He waited until Rennie came in, wondering how he would say the one more thing that must be said. He took her hands, looking down at her fine-featured face. He said, "I'm sorry Joe didn't know about you. He'd have been proud of you and he'd want you to stay here. The Wagon Wheel is yours. Me and the crew go with it. Mamie said I was in love with a ranch, but I'm in love with you, too. I didn't know until tonight. I mean, I've been thinking about the Wagon Wheel and worrying about it—"

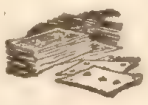
"Grant, Grant!" she said. "You know I couldn't stay here without you."

"That's what I wanted to hear," he said. "It's all mixed up, you and me and the crew. Well, it's just that we all go together."

She looked at him for a moment, her dark eyes bright and expectant. She said, "You know, Grant, I've always been in love with you, but I didn't know it. I should have, because when I wanted to think of something nice, I thought about you."

He took her into his arms and kissed her. For that moment he forgot how tired he was; he forgot the steady, nagging ache in his side. Her lips were sweet and clinging under his; her arms were tight around him and she was all fire and passion.

Red had been right. She would make a good wife.



NEXT ISSUE

SLICK EAR by GIFF CHESHIRE

A NOVEL OF A WANDERING WADDY WHO LIKED TO GAMBLE – UNTIL HE MET THE BIGGEST GAMBLE OF HIS LIFE: A WOMAN!

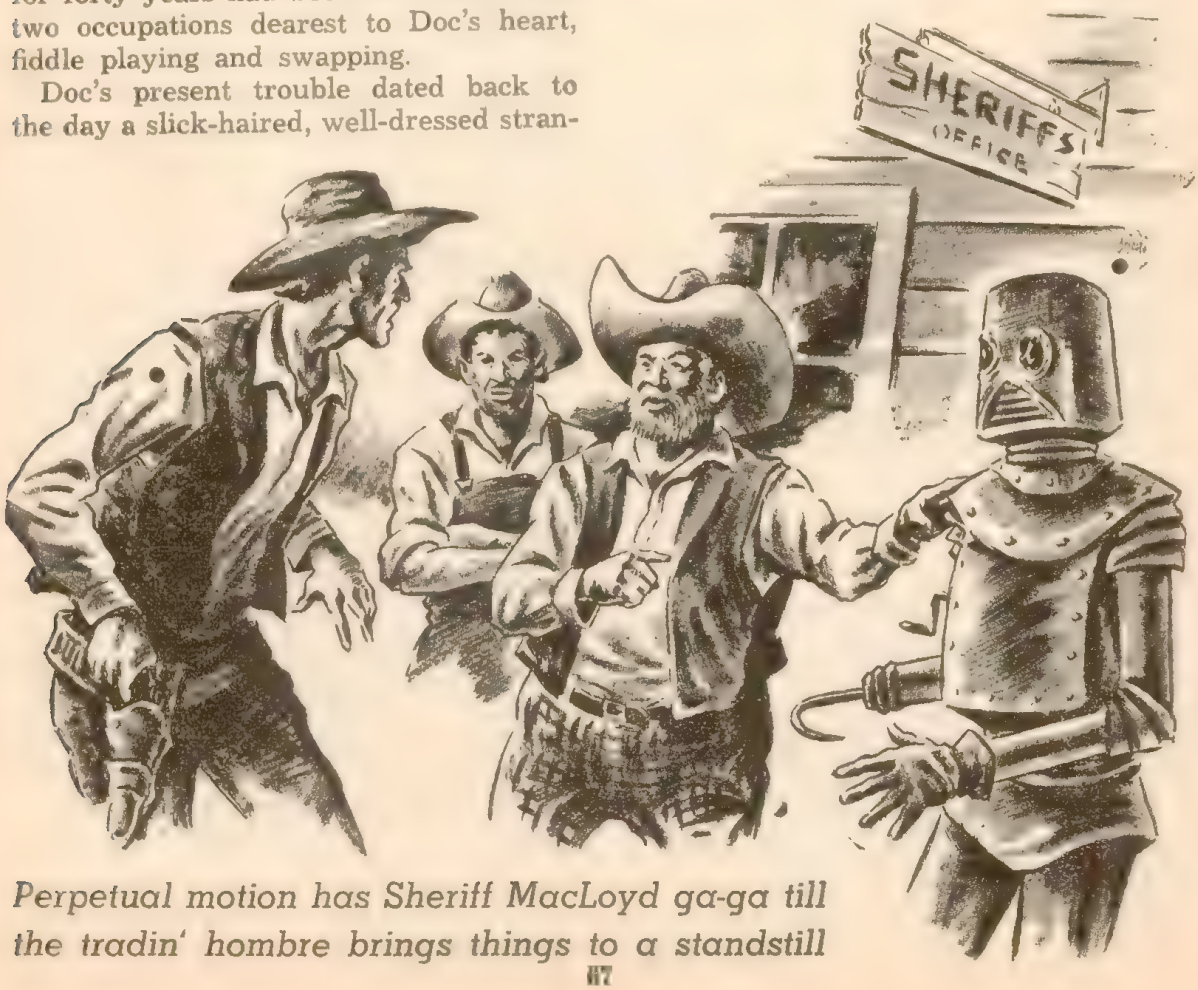
DOC SWAP'S MECHANICAL MAN

By BEN FRANK

OLD DOC SWAP was fit to be tied. During the past few days, he'd been so upset that he'd finally lost his appetite. He hadn't been hungry at breakfast time, and now it was time to cook up his dinner, and still he wasn't hungry.

"Dad-blasted, skinny ole coyote!" he ranted, referring to Sheriff MacLoyd, who for forty years had been his rival in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart, fiddle playing and swapping.

Doc's present trouble dated back to the day a slick-haired, well-dressed stranger arrived in Dry Bluffs. All Doc had ever been able to learn about the man was his name: Professor Jonas Jordon. That was enough to irritate the old swapper, for Doc liked to know everything about everyone. But the thing that really got under his hide was the startling effect that the stranger had had on Sheriff MacLoyd.



Perpetual motion has Sheriff MacLoyd ga-ga till the tradin' hombre brings things to a standstill

It so happened that Doc had been working around to swap the sheriff out of a Swiss music box, but a few days after the professor arrived, MacLoyd refused to talk trade. In fact, he wouldn't talk, period! He simply sat in his office with a dazed look in his pale-blue eyes.

Still snorting like a sod-pawing longhorn, Doc fixed up some dinner and attempted to eat, but nothing tasted right. He waddled out into his neat front yard and stared along the one street. Everything appeared quiet and peaceful. No sign of the mysterious slick-haired professor who had ruined Doc's appetite.

Suddenly Doc gave a start. Deacon Plumb, Dry Bluff's wealthiest citizen, was headed for the sheriff's office. At that moment, Jed Williams stepped out of his real estate and loan office and joined the deacon. Together the two big men of the town went on to the jail and disappeared through the office door.

"Ding-dum!" Doc exploded. "Now what?"

He stepped back into his cottage and tried to forget the whole thing. But the harder he tried, the more he thought about it. And the more put-out he became. Doc Swap simply couldn't stand to have something brewing in Dry Bluffs unless he knew all about it. Especially if Sheriff MacLoyd were involved.

PRESENTLY he went outside again and saw the deacon and Jed standing in front of the post office, talking excitedly. Doc felt his worry grow.

"Oughtn't to go near that jail, the snooty way ole MacLoyd's been actin' lately," Doc muttered. "Oh, well!"

Tightening his fancy pearl-gray Stetson over his shiny bald head, he headed through the late afternoon sunshine for the cracker-box jail, climbed the three sagging steps to the door and barged in.

The sheriff sat behind his spur-scarred desk, bony chin cupped in bony hands, a far-away look in his pale eyes.

"Fine evenin'," Doc said pleasantly.

"Was up to now," MacLoyd returned coldly.

Holding back a hot retort, Doc sat down and smiled. His eyes swept the room. The battered filing case. The rusty iron safe. A small brown jug sitting on a shelf. Doc felt a tingle move through him. That jug was the Swiss music box he'd been trying to swap for. Pick it up, and it would play "Auld Lang Syne" in the most fascinating, tinkling manner.

"Been thinkin' some about that music box," Doc said without any show of enthusiasm. "Might swap yuh that heifer for—"

"Doc," MacLoyd interrupted harshly, "I wouldn't consider—"

"Heh, heh!" Doc chuckled. "Yuh're a smart trader, an' I allus like to do business with—"

"Doc, I ain't swappin'. Too much else on my mind."

"Such as?"

MacLoyd dead-centered the battered brass spittoon with a gusty explosion. "The biggest thing that ever hit humanity! Doc, how much money you got to invest in a sure thing?"

Doc felt the cold sweat pop out on his whiskery face. Anytime Sheriff MacLoyd thought he had a sure-fire thing, it was likely a bust.

"Doc," the sheriff went on in a hoarse whisper, "you and Deacon Plumb and Jed Williams is the only ones I'm lettin' in on this. An' I wouldn't let you three in on it if I had enough money to swing it myself."

He fumbled in a pocket of his gravy-spotted vest and drew out a slip of paper. Then he found his steel-rimmed spectacles and set them astraddle his big nose. He bow-legged it to the old iron safe and scowled at the slip of paper.

"Never can remember the combination," he complained.

Doc hurried over to the safe. Inside sat a contraption of brass wheels, pulleys and weights, resembling somewhat a clock without a face or hands. Surrounding it completely was a glass dome. The wheels, Doc saw, were spinning merrily.

"Perpetual motion!" MacLoyd said in an awed voice.

"Perpet— there ain't no such thing!" Doc sputtered.

"That's what Deacon Plumb and Jed Williams said the first time they saw it." The sheriff's bony face glowed with enthusiasm. "Doc," he said, carefully closing the safe door and locking it, "set yore fat carcass down and listen to me."

Doc sat down on the nearest chair. He felt slightly faint. Sheriff MacLoyd, he reckoned, had tumbled into a fake scheme clear up to his big ears and was trying to get others into it. Doc shuddered. If Deacon Plumb and Jed Williams got hooked and lost some money, they'd never forgive MacLoyd. Come next election, they'd sure enough put the skids under the bony old sheriff. And Doc was right fond of his old friendly-enemy, even if he wouldn't admit it.

"Yuh blasted ole fool!" he exploded. "Anybody with any sense would know that perpetual motion ain't—"

HE GAVE up and sank back on his chair. "Doc," MacLoyd said, "a few days after Professor Jonas Jordon come to Dry Bluffs, he lugged that contraption into my office.

" 'Sheriff,' he says, 'I got somethin' here a lot of people would give their right arms to get holt of. It's perpetual motion, and the manufacturers of locomotives and engines are scared to death of it. They know it'll put 'em out of business. I wonder if you got a place where this thing could be locked up?' "

MacLoyd paused to unload into the spittoon.

"Well, sir, I was as unbelievin' as you, Doc. But I told him I would lock it up in the safe. That was almost six weeks ago, an' that thing ain't been touched since. I know positive, for I've been mighty careful about lockin' my safe. And it's still runnin' just as lively as ever!"

"Well, what about it?" Doc growled.

"Professor Jordon is goin' to let me form a company to build them machines in big sizes. Big enough to pull trains!"

"Kinda expensive, huh?"

MacLoyd nodded. "That's why I'm lettin' you and—"

"Might swap yuh a saddle for that music box."

MacLoyd's bony face flushed. "Doc," he sputtered angrily, "can't you keep yore feeble mind off swappin' for two minutes?"

"I'd want some boot, how-some-ever."

Furious, MacLoyd reared up to his six feet of skin and bones. "Yuh fat ole ninny, I might of knowed it would be a waste of time to talk to you!"

Grinning, Doc tightened his fancy hat and walked out. Nothing he liked better than to get MacLoyd so upset he didn't know whether he was coming or going. But once outside, his feeling of elation was replaced by one of deep concern. He knew for sure that his old crony had put both big feet ito a sloughful of trouble.

That night, Doc made up his mind. He would go on a swapping spree through Sugar Valley. Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were traders. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind, helped him solve his problems; and Doc had two mighty weighty problems to solve.

First, he had to do something about this perpetual motion business. He couldn't let MacLoyd go along with a thing like that and lose all his hard-earned savings, besides making a fool of himself. Second, Doc wanted to wrangle the sheriff out of that music box. Perpetual motion or not, a man had to keep up his reputation as the best swapper in Bluff County.

His mind made up, Doc fell asleep immediately. By morning, his appetite had returned, and he cooked and ate a hearty breakfast.

Whistling merrily, he hurried to the barn, harnessed his team of sleek bays and hooked them to the old covered wagon in which he carried his swapping goods. Then he wandered around to a pile of junk behind the barn and picked up the first thing that met his eye, a small cog wheel. This he tossed into the wagon along with his camping gear. A minute

later, he was on his way over the rutted dusty street of Dry Bluffs, headed for the Sugar Creek Trail which led to the heart of Sugar Valley.

Doc made his first stop at Homer Prutt's place. Homer, a bachelor, farmed in a hap-hazard manner when he wasn't trying to invent something. Doc found the young man sitting on the doorstep of his leanto workshop, gazing vacantly into space.

"Homer," Doc said, "yuh look like yuh're on the verge of a brain storm."

"Am," Homer said, blinking happily. "Figure on inventin' a machine to save people from workin'."

"Do tell!" Doc murmured. "Such as?"

"A mechanical man. Just crank him up, and he milks the cows, feeds the—Doc, is that a cogwheel?"

"Sounds like a good idea, Homer," Doc said, running his fat fingers over the wheel. "Allus wished I had a mechanical man."

BUT Homer, who had a great weakness for cogwheels, wasn't to be side-tracked. "That cogwheel, Doc, you aim to sell it?"

"Ain't no hand to sell," Doc countered. "Might swap."

Homer wanted that wheel; and for it, Doc got an old set of harness, a peck of potatoes, and an old wagon wheel to boot. Not that the wheel was any good, but to Doc, a swap wasn't a swap without something to boot.

He had driven less than a mile when he met Charley Whitehorse. Charley, the son of Chief White Eagle and the heir to a hundred oil wells, was home from college. A Phi Beta Kappa key hung from a gold watch chain that crossed his open-neck faded shirt.

Charley grinned broadly and said, "Hello, Doc."

"How," Doc said, grinning back. Then, soberly, "Homer Prutt tells me he's about to invent a mechanical man to do his work."

Charley threw back his head and laughed. "Want to bet?"

Doc shook his head. "I ain't a gambler; just a swapper. Charley, what's yore opinion of perpetual motion?"

Charley laughed again. "Scientifically unsound. Due to friction, there is always a loss of power. Therefore—"

"My sentiments, exactly," Doc chuckled. "But I'm not so sure but what Homer's got somethin' in his mechanical man idea. Fact is, the more I think about it, the more I have a notion to help him out a mite with his invention."

"Doc, you old rascal, what's on your mind?"

"Ain't quite sure. But I'd kind of like tc have Sheriff MacLoyd hear about Homer's invention. Wouldn't mind meetin' the ole buzzard out here in the valley. Got any ideas, Charley?"

Charley's grin widened. "One or two, Doc."

"I reckon I'll camp as usual on Sugar Creek," Doc murmured.

"See you later, Doc," the young Indian said and turned his pinto toward Dry Bluffs.

Grinning, Doc drove on. Just one swap had started the wheels in his head to turning.

Next, he stopped at the Zoop homestead and found Mrs. Themistocles Whetstone Zoop busily painting the fence posts in front of the house.

"Right purty," Doc commented, sliding from his wagon.

"Too busy to do any swapping," she said stiffly.

"Ain't got a thing yuh'd want," Doc declared. "Recall seein' a fancy house in Philly with a fancy painted wagon wheel in the yard for flowers to grow up on. Mighty eye-catchin'."

"Might be," Mrs. Zoop admitted, "but I don't have a wheel."

"I got a spare," Doc murmured, "but aim to use it for—"

"Let me see it," the woman interrupted.

"No use for you to look at it," Doc sighed. "Aim to keep—"

But, a calculating gleam in her eyes, Mrs. Zoop was peering under the canvas

cover of the old wagon.

"Might pay you a dollar for—"

"Wouldn't sell it a-tall," Doc said firmly.

A few minutes later, Doc drove away from the Zoop homestead minus the old wheel. But he did have some red and white paint, an assortment of flower seed, half a chocolate cake and a leaky copper wash boiler to boot. The boiler didn't look like much, but it had given the wheels in Doc's head another spin.

The old swapper arrived at the Porter homestead and found the two cousins, Loop and Puney, just sitting down to dinner.

"What, no dessert?" Doc said in a shocked voice.

He unwrapped the half of chocolate cake, while Puney and Loop gazed in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Doc," Loop said huskily, "could yuh spare a few bites—"

"Why, sure," Doc said obligingly, "if it'd pay for my dinner. Might want that ole paint brush and a few joints of stovepipe and them leather gloves to boot."

"Only one glove," Puney muttered. "Lost t'other one."

"One glove's better'n none," Doc said, slicing off three generous pieces of cake.

"Doc," Loop said gratefully. "yuh're a true friend!"

LATER, Doc drove to where a big cottonwood shaded the trail and stretched out on the grass for his afternoon nap. He had just dozed off when Sheriff MacLoyd, a scowl on his bony face, came rattling up in his old buggy.

"Wisht I didn't have nothin' to do but sleep," he growled. "No wonder yuh're so fat yuh can't—"

"What yuh doin' out here, Sheriff?" Doc asked pleasantly.

"Charley Whitehorse was in town an' said he might've heard shootin' near Jake Duskins' place. Figured I'd better drive out to see if Jake an' ole Bob Walker are feudin' again."

Doc let that pass without comment. "Perpetual motion machine still runnin'?"

"Like a house a-fire. Doc yuh'd better join up with me."

"Thinkin' of helpin' Homer Prutt invent a mechanical man."

"Charley mentioned Homer was—but, Doc you ain't so dumb yuh'd fall for anything Homer tries to make? Why, that thick-headed hombre couldn't tie a knot in a lariat, let alone—"

"A mechanical man sounds as reasonable as perpetual motion."

MacLoyd's face had turned a dangerous red. "Tryin' to intimate I'm not smart enough to know perpetual motion when I see it? Why, yuh over-stuffed baboon, I—"

His voice choked off in a weak gurgle, for at that moment, Doc had unwrapped the remainder of the chocolate cake.

"Doc," MacLoyd gasped, "that looks delicious!"

"Is," Doc said happily.

"Wouldn't give me a piece?"

"Might swap—for that music box."

MacLoyd drowned a bumble-bee with an angry stream of tobacco juice. "Doc, yuh ole hoss-thief, I wouldn't swap yuh that music box if I was starvin' to death. Giddap—"

"Might swap for somethin' else," Doc said, unperturbed.

For a slice of cake, Doc received a pair of sun goggles with one cracked lens, some fishing tackle and an old pair of hightop shoes to boot.

"Heh, heh," MacLoyd chuckled as he stuffed the last of the cake into his mouth, "them shoes has holes in the soles."

"A mechanical man likely won't mind a few holes," Doc returned solemnly.

Snorting disgustedly, MacLoyd drove away.

Presently, Doc mounted the sagging spring seat of his old wagon and drove leisurely along the trail to a small, unkept house. A great swarm of dogs came charging through a hole in the screen door, yapping excitedly. Following the mutts was their owner, Dog-ears Dover, who had moved to the valley from Missouri, bringing along all twenty-one of his canine friends.

"Shaddup!" he bellowed; and the dogs hushed immediately.

Doc climbed from the wagon and gave the nearest dog, an ugly flea-bitten hound, a friendly pat.

"Fine animal," he said enthusiastically.

"Yuh bet!" Dog-ears beamed.

"Too bad yuh don't have leather collars for yore dogs."

"It'd take a heap of leather," Dog-ears said sadly.

"I got a ole set of harness," Doc murmured.

The next thing Dog-ears Dover knew, he had become the owner of a set of worn-out harness in exchange for five empty gallon tins, a large box of bolts and screws, a smoked ham and a roll of baling wire to boot.

Doc made one more stop that day. At the Turner place. Mule and his wife, Ida, were sitting comfortably on their sagging front porch, seeming without a care in the world.

DOC crossed the unkept front yard, swept his fancy Stetson from his head and bowed gallantly, considering his shape and size.

"Fine evenin' folks. Yuh sure look mighty contented."

"Reckon we are," Mule said, eyeing Doc suspiciously.

"We don't aim to swap nothin'," Ida declared firmly.

"That's fine," Doc said, sitting down on the steps. "Tired of swappin'. Just want to set and visit."

Ida relaxed somewhat, and Mule fired up his corncob pipe.

"What's the latest news, Doc?" he asked presently.

Doc frowned thoughtfully. "The Zoops are fixin' their place up right handsome. Plantin' flowers and such. Reckon they'll have the nicest lookin' home in Sugar Valley soon."

Ida stiffened. "Them Zoops think they're somebodies."

"Ain't no two ways about it," Doc murmured, "flowers do make a place look nice. Now take this yard of yours—"

"Wanted Mule to buy flower seed t'other day," Ida muttered.

"Ain't goin' to throw away good money on flower seed," Mule growled, "no matter what the Zoops do."

"Don't blame yuh," Doc agreed quickly. "Now, take them flower seeds I got, they—"

"Doc," Ida cut in, "you've got some flower seeds?"

Doc nodded. " 'Course, I won't sell 'em. Mrs. Zoop—"

"I'm tired of hearin' about them stiff-necked Zoops," Mule said. "Doc, let's have a look at them flower seeds."

For the assortment of flower seeds, Doc received a pound of coffee, two loaves of homemade bread, a dozen eggs and a worn-out sausage grinder to boot. Not that Doc expected to grind any sausage, but he had a need for that crank on the old grinder.

Arriving at his favorite camping site on the right bank of Sugar Creek, he found Charley Whitehorse there, waiting for him. Charley took a peek into the wagon and grinned broadly.

"Got some fishin' tackle, too," Doc said. "And some empty gallon cans."

Charley needed no second hint. He grabbed up the fishing tackle and two of the cans and wandered away along the creek. Doc got busy making camp. By the time he had unpacked his gear and had a fire going, Charley was back with a string of fish and the two cans heaped with fat blackberries.

After they had eaten, they sat near the dying embers of the campfire in friendly silence, listening to the croak of the bull-frogs in the creek and watching the fire-flies skimming over the tall grass.

At last Charley chuckled and sat up. "Let's have it, Doc. What kind of a scheme have you cooked up for all that junk?"

Grinning, Doc outlined his plans for the next day.

After he'd finished, Charley said, "I'll go along with you if it's the last thing I ever do. What a yarn it'll make to tell the boys when I go back to school!"

The next morning, Charley mounted his

pinto and rode on along the creek. Doc climbed aboard the old covered wagon and headed his bays on down the trail. He had one more thing to swap for before he could complete his plans.

An hour later, he pulled his team to a halt in front of Ad Trotter's tar-papered shack.

Ad was up, but not moving around. He sat in his old rocking chair in the shade made by the one unhappy oak in his bare front yard, a weary expression on his leathery face.

"Doc," he said, "the nights ain't never long enough. Time I go coon huntin' and get to bed, it's time to get up."

"What you need," Doc allowed, "is a nip of tonic each mornin' to put a little ginger into yuh."

"I know it," Ad admitted readily. "But, Doc, I'm fresh outa tonic and ain't got nothin' to make more of."

"Sorry I can't help yuh none," Doc said sadly, lifting up a can of blackberries and chucking a few into his mouth.

Ad Trotter's eyes bugged. "Doc," he wheezed, "didn't you ever hear tell of blackberry wine?"

FOR the berries, Doc got an old home-made hog chute, a bright and shiny hayhook, and for boot, the thing for which he had driven all the way out here, the working parts of an old grandfather's clock, which Ad had inherited from an uncle.

When Doc arrived at Homer Prutt's homestead that morning, he found Homer and Charley Whitehorse sitting in the shade of Homer's workshop. Whistling merrily, Doc began to unload his loot: copper wash boiler, empty tin cans, stove pipe, sun goggles, clock wheels, one leather glove, sausage grinder, wire, bolts, paint—

"Goshamighty!" Homer gulped. "What'd all that cost yuh, Doc?"

"One cogwheel," Doc replied, "and you've got that, Homer!"

The shadows were beginning to thicken in the street of Dry Bluffs when Sheriff MacLoyd unlocked his safe for another peek at Prof. Jordon's perpetual motion machine.

The wheels of the machine were spinning madly.

"I'll bet that thing'll run forever and ever!"

What he saw through the fly-specked window cut him short. Doc Swap had backed his covered wagon to the board walk in front of the jail and now, with Homer Prutt's help, was adjusting a wooden hog chute against the endgate.

CUSSING, MacLoyd bow-legged it to the door.

"Now, looky," he began, "don't yuh unload no critter . . ."

His voice died in his throat. Homer was balancing upright the strangest looking critter MacLoyd had ever seen. It looked like a cross between a man and a scrap-pile. It had a head shaped like a bucket, with glass windows for eyes. One of the dark glasses was cracked, but MacLoyd was too dumbfounded to connect his sun goggles with this feature of the strange apparition.

The what-ever-it-was clanked down the hog chute like a clumsy bear. The last rays of the sun gleamed redly on its copper torso. Its legs and arms resembled joints of stove pipe, except they were painted with gaudy red and white stripes. It wore high-topped shoes with heavy, clanking iron soles.

It had only one hand, which was covered with a leather glove. The other stovepipe arm ended in a wicked looking iron hook.

Before the sheriff could find his voice, the thing began to sag at the joints. Homer rushed up and turned the sausage grinder crank that stuck out of the contraption's copper side. There followed a great whirring of gears, and the thing came to life promptly and shook MacLoyd's limp hand, squeezing his bony fingers until they tingled.

"Sheriff," Doc said, "meet George, Homer's mechanical man."

MacLoyd had dropped his half-paralyzed hand to his six-gun.

"Get that blamed thing out of here!" he bleated.

"George won't hurt yuh none," Doc said soothingly.

George, followed by Doc and Homer, clanked into the jail office.

"Set down, George," Homer said; and George, creaking in a dozen joints sank down on a chair.

MacLoyd mopped his clammy brow. There were things about George he didn't like. The vacant stare of those goggle eyes. The sharp hook where there should have been a hand.

"The only thing wrong with George," Homer said sadly, "he runs down kind of quick and has to be cranked up."

"Yep," Doc nodded. "If Homer only had a perpetual motion machine to put inside him, he'd be all right."

A SUDDEN trickle of suspicion crossed MacLoyd's mind, but before he could get his thinking organized, there came a great clatter from within George.

"Oh, oh!" Homer said in alarm. "Somethin' slipped."

He opened a panel in George's copper ribs, exposing a great clutter of large clock wheels to the sheriff's bug-eyed gaze. After tinkering a moment with a screwdriver, Homer closed the panel and wound George up again.

That brief view of George's innards drove away MacLoyd's doubts. Here indeed, sitting before him, was a true mechanical marvel.

"Homer," he said respectfully, "I didn't think yuh had it in yuh to build a mechanical man."

"What Homer wants to do," Doc put in, "is lock his invention up safe in a cell for the night. Don't want nobody tinkerin' with George's delicate insides."

A moment later, George lay stretched out on a cell cot, the cell door had been locked, and Doc and Homer had departed. Everything had happened too quickly for MacLoyd. He had been so befuddled and awed that he hadn't even objected when Doc had walked off with the key to George's cell.

But alone with George, the bean-pole sheriff gazed with renewed mistrust through the bars at the mechanical man. He had a vague feeling that he'd just had a fast one slipped past him, but he didn't know what to do about it. Cussing with the expertness of sixty years practice, he at last put on his hat and went home for the night.

But MacLoyd didn't sleep worth shucks. Early the next morning, determined to rid the jail of George, even if he had to tear out the bars to get him, the bony old sheriff hurried to the jail.

WHAT he saw in George's cell suddenly sent the hot blood pounding through his ears.

A pile of junk lay in one corner and Charley Whitehorse lay on the cot, sleeping peacefully.

The young Indian yawned and opened his dark eyes.

"Got tired of lying around in all that tin," he said, grinning, "so crawled out and took a snooze."

"Charley," MacLoyd roared, "somebody's goin' to have his big fat neck wrung for this! And his name is—"

"Fine mornin', Sheriff," Doc said pleasantly from the office doorway where he stood, smiling broadly.

Snarling, MacLoyd whirled about. What he saw held him speechless for the moment.

Besides Doc Swap, face pale beneath his black, slicked-down hair, stood Professor Jonas Jordon.

"Invited the professor over to see Homer's—Oh, hello, Charley." Doc waddled to the cell and unlocked the door. "Have a good night's sleep?"

"Just fair," Charley answered, stepping into the corridor. "Got woke up in the middle of the night."

"How come?" Doc asked, looking surprised.

Charley pointed a brown finger at the professor. "That man crawled through the back window and opened the sheriff's safe. Saw his face as plain as day when he lit a match so he could read the combination.

Lit another match so he could see to wind up his perpetual motion machine."

"Sheriff," Doc said mildly, "yuh should either learn the combination to that safe, or keep that paper yuh got the numbers writ on some'ers where nobody will be able to see—"

At that moment, the professor lunged for the open doorway.

"Stop him!" MacLoyd bellowed, making a wild rush forward.

BUT old Doc Swap stood in the doorway, blocking it neatly.

"Doc," the sheriff raged, "I give that swindler fifty dollars t'other day, and—"

"Yuh got off cheap," Doc said calmly. "Suppose yuh'd give him all yore money and got the deacon and Jed Williams hooked, and on top of that, made a fool of yourself?"

That stopped MacLoyd cold.

"Maybe," Doc went on, "it's best to let the jasper go and charge the fifty dollars up to experience."

Chuckling, he turned to the young Indian.

"This, Charley, might be a good time to spread word around town that Professor Jonas Jordon decided to leave Dry Bluffs and look some'ers else for a place to build his perpetual motion machines in."

Grinning broadly, Charley departed to spread the news.

"Doc," MacLoyd said hoarsely, "it's gettin' so a man can't trust nobody. Not even you. So git!"

"Just what I aim to do," Doc said pleasantly. Tightening his fancy hat, he picked up the jug music box and headed for the door.

"Hey, yuh blasted ole thief!" MacLoyd sputtered. "I won't stand for yuh stealin' my property!"

"Ain't stealin' it," Doc said. "Just swappin' George for it. Figured yuh'd rather swap than have people know—"

"Shore, yuh bet," Sheriff MacLoyd said weakly.

Eyes sparkling, old Doc Swap stepped out into the early twilight. It sure sounded pretty, "Auld Lang Syne," the way it came tinkling out of that little brown jug under his arm.

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SONG

Black Tern, the Haida warrior, battles a raging sea for the love of the daughter of the chief who condemned him to drown

OF THE RAVEN

by FRANCIS H. AMES

SEA HAWK, chief of the Gunghet Haidagai tribe of the Haida Indians, clan of the Eagle, squatted below the fire hole of his house on the southernmost island of the Queen Charlotte group. He turned the copper shield slowly in his hands, inspecting it carefully for the benefit of Black Tern, as though he had not inspected it every day since it had come into his hands a year back. This copper shield was appropriately named, "Disappearing Blankets From My House," for it had taken the combined possessions of Sea Hawk and his many relatives to buy it from Thunder Bird, the Tlingit chief. Two thousand blankets and many bladders of eulachon oil had been the purchase price.

The Gunghet Haidagai had once owned another copper trophy, valued at five thousand blankets, but it had been stolen from them. Sea Hawk ran his hands lovingly over the polished surface of his copper shield and he lifted his eyes to Black Tern.

"The Raven cannot marry my daughter," he said. "He has nothing to buy her with."

Black Tern was young, and his blood was hot. He thought of the few blankets, the trade musket, and the long bladed, beautiful Boston man's knife that he had inherited from his father. These had seemed enough to him, equal to the payments most young men made for the woman that they wished to marry.

It was a rule among the Haida that a Raven must marry an Eagle, and an Eagle a Raven. One could not marry within one's own clan. So Black Tern, feeling the urge for a wife, had taken his father's war canoe and journeyed south from his native Bear Island, seeking an Eagle wife. Here he had seen Shalish, Sea Hawk's daughter, and known at once that she was the only woman for his lodge.

Black Tern's heart had sunk, when Sea Hawk had brought out the copper shield, fingering it, letting Black Tern know that the marriage price for Shalish would be too high for him to pay. No young man owned a copper shield, and indeed, Sea Hawk did not own this one. He was but its custodian for his clan. Yet he flaunted it in Black Tern's face now, knowing that Yellow Mask, the Bella Coola brave, would be able to pay more for Shalish than would Black Tern.

CHIEF SEA HAWK wore a blue designed blanket, wrapped about his bulky shoulders. A high cedar hat, trimmed with human hair and ornamented with a grinning, toothsome appearing eagle, with a long, purple bill, sat squarely on his head. He shook his head ponderously now, until his drooping mustaches quivered.

"Such a poor man," he scoffed, "should not seek to marry the daughter of one who has such a copper shield as this. Begone, Raven, and do not speak to my daughter in fear of your life."

The words angered Black Tern, and his dark, fierce eyes glowed. An Eagle spoke softly to a Raven warrior, or met a reckoning. Black Tern's glance moved to Shalish.

She sat demurely before her weaving frame, hearing what was being said, apparently paying no attention, although her future was involved.

Her arms, raised in her weaving, brought out the slender lines of her body,

the strong molding of her breasts as her nimble fingers shuttled the goat's hair weft threads of many colors through the cedar warp strings. She was copying an ancient Eagle clan design painted upon the drawing board before her. She felt Tern's glance, and her eyes turned to meet his shyly.

She wore a blue skirt below a colorful waist of ermine trimmed bird skins, and her long, black hair was thrown back over her shoulders in twin braids. Her slightly slanted eyes held a dark and mysterious glow. Her lips moved, as though she spoke silently to Black Tern. Then she turned back to her work.

"I am a guest in your village," Black Tern's words to her father were sharp. "I will talk to whom I please. The Haida Raven is equal to the Haida Eagle."

Sea Hawk came slowly to his feet, laying the copper disk carefully on the bench that ran around the wall of his house, picking up his long beaked war ax. His wrinkled features were tight with controlled dignity, his long, pendulous ear lobes quivering with his indignation. The skinny Eagle shaman in the far corner of the room roused himself to shake his rattle, the sound thin in the room.

"I am a chief," Sea Hawk said, "and for my daughter in marriage you offer fifty blankets, a trade gun, and a Boston man's knife. I have never heard of Black Tern, of the Haida Raven. His deeds have not rung loud in my ears. With one blow of my ax I could split the skull of such an infant."

Sea Hawk lifted his war ax threateningly. Instantly Black Tern cast aside his crimson, goat's hair blanket, and the long, wicked Boston knife was in his hand. Black Tern had appeared to be but a bulky cloth swathed figure in his robe. Now he stood poised—a brown, sleekly muscled warrior, the ermine tails of his raven beaked headdress, hanging down on either side of his lean angered features.

"Lift your war club against Black Tern," he warned, "and I carve a Raven on your belly."

Black Tern sensed the whisper of sound behind his back, rather than heard it. Before he could turn, a brawny arm went around his throat, his knife wrist was locked at his side, a sharp knee thrust cruelly in his back.

Tern bent forward explosively, throwing his attacker over his head, seeing that it was Yellow Mask, the Bella Coola. Then he was borne to the floor by the impact of many bodies.

Shalish sprang from her loom, backing to the wall, her eyes wide and dark with fright. Yellow Mask came up from where he sprawled on the floor, to smash Black Tern across the face.

"*Wah!*" he shouted. "Death to the Raven."

Sea Hawk calmly leaned his war club against the ornately carved center post behind the fire, and turned to face Black Tern, held by his warriors.

"Give the Raven cub his knife," he spat out, "with which he would buy my daughter, and carve my belly. Put him in his canoe without his blankets. Let us see how the Raven fledgling withstands the howling of the salt chuck today."

Black Tern's eyes were on Shalish, and it seemed to him that her soft, red lips rounded in protest. He thought of the storm that raged outside the island channel today, howling down from the tip of Alaska, barring his return to his home on Bear Island. Sea Hawk was clever. He knew that Tern's canoe would be driven south, helpless in the tremendous rollers. Sea Hawk's warriors would follow Black Tern's progress down the coast of the island, not permitting him to land, and he would be forced beyond shelter of the coast. Word would never get back to the Haida Raven, of Sea Hawk's treatment of one of their clan.

BUT a Raven warrior could not show fear. Black Tern straightened his shoulders, contemptuously shrugging aside the Eagle warrior's hands.

"I will go," he said, "and I will return from the sea. I will come for Shalish. Let the Eagle remember this."

Shalish's eyes met his squarely, and

Black Tern knew that he had given, and she had accepted, a promise that he had little chance of keeping.

Taking Black Tern down to the edge of the water, the Eagle warriors shoved him into his canoe and set him adrift.

Black Tern's hollowed log canoe, in which he had set out so bravely to find himself a wife among the Eagle clans, was strong. Its sides were flared to keep out the seas, its proud Raven forepeak, exquisitely carved, flung the flying spray from its blue beak. Yet the vessel was too large for one man to handle in such a sea as ran now.

In his eagerness to impress the Eagle that he was a man of parts, Black Tern had brought his father's war canoe on the fifty-mile trip from Bear Island to the southernmost island of the Queen Charlottes. With the calm weather of fall, and a fair wind at his back, such a canoe obeyed the paddle of one man. Black Tern had planned to await a fair return wind, after his marriage to the woman that he was certain that he would win, and he had thought that his welcoming in-laws would undoubtedly make the return voyage with him, for a feast and potlatch.

Now he found himself in a howling storm, driven south over unknown waters. Mountainous waves tossed their crests to meet the low, scudding clouds. Lore of the island seas is handed down from father to son. Black Tern let his mind dwell on what his father had taught him of them, seeking a way to safety.

Below the island of Sea Hawk, there lay open water to the end of the world. To the east, along the rugged continental coasts, were many islands where one might find safety, if the Bella Coola did not kill him. To the west and south lay Vancouver Island, perhaps a hundred miles away. There the fierce Nootka would surely kill him. Either route was preferable to drifting to the edge of the world, to drop into eternal darkness. Yet the wind drove straight down along the coast. Black Tern knew, as had Sea Hawk, that his vessel, handled by one man, would not live were he to attempt to quarter into the combers.

He began a slow, patient fight for his life, letting the wind drive him south, with the following waves drenching his back. He set his mind to ignore the cold that clutched at his bowels, and craftily turned his canoe ever to the west in a hundred mile long arc that did not quarter his craft to the wind-driven seas.

Darkness was coming down now, and Black Tern knew that by dawn there would be great danger of his being driven beyond Vancouver Island. His life would surely be forfeit if he missed the land. As the hours passed, a numbness came to his body under the slow, rhythmatic movement of his paddle. He seemed an automaton, with only his fierce determined eyes alive. It seemed to Black Tern that the farther south he went, the higher grew the seas and the more tumultuous the wind. He was lost in a raging wilderness of water.

Dawn came up with a gray mist, torn to fragments in the wind, scudding across a sea that was mountainous and crested with curling whitecaps. And then the sweet scent of the land came to his nostrils. Hopelessness came at last to Black Tern's eyes. A man could not smell land unless it was borne down the wind to him. Vancouver Island lay behind him, and to the west. He could not turn and fight back to it.

His paddle stilled and the canoe rode high on a comber that kicked its rear about. A torrent of green water poured over the gunwale. Squatting stoically in the stern, Black Tern waited for death in the salt chuck.

He saw the next comber rushing down upon him, towering over the canoe as it lay in the trough, curling to grasp out for him. Then he thought of Shalish. Her eyes reached out to him, as they had in her father's house, and her lips moved in a soundless message. Suddenly a fierce will to live returned to him, and he drove his paddle down, thrusting against it with all his strength, twisting the canoe around to meet the challenge head-on with its defiant Raven's beak.

THE canoe went up, staggering. As it rode the top of the waves, Black Tern saw a purple land mass to the east and south. He remembered, then, the tales of the San Juans that he had heard around the fire. His father had seen these islands from a distance when he went to trade with the Nootka, on Vancouver Island. Warriors before the time of Black Tern's father had handed down stories of their raids upon the Lummi, who lived on these islands. Black Tern's body warmed with new hope.

He drove for the island with all his power. With victory seemingly within his grasp, the wind died down to a whisper. The huge combers still rolled, but spindrift was no longer blown raggedly from their angry peaks.

The towering cliffs of San Juan lay less than a mile distant when Black Tern saw a great war canoe streaking across his path, a white bone in its teeth. At first Black Tern was puzzled by the speed of the craft, for the arms of the paddlers were stilled. Then he saw an unheaval before the vessel, as the broad tail of a whale lashed at the surface.

Once again legend came to Black Tern's understanding. He had listened to his elders talk of the exploits of the Nootka. They would set their harpoons in these tremendous sea beasts, letting the whales tow them until exhausted. Then they would drive in many harpoons, trailing air bladders, and tow the behemoth home in triumph. Often they were towed for two or three days before the whale tired sufficiently to be killed.

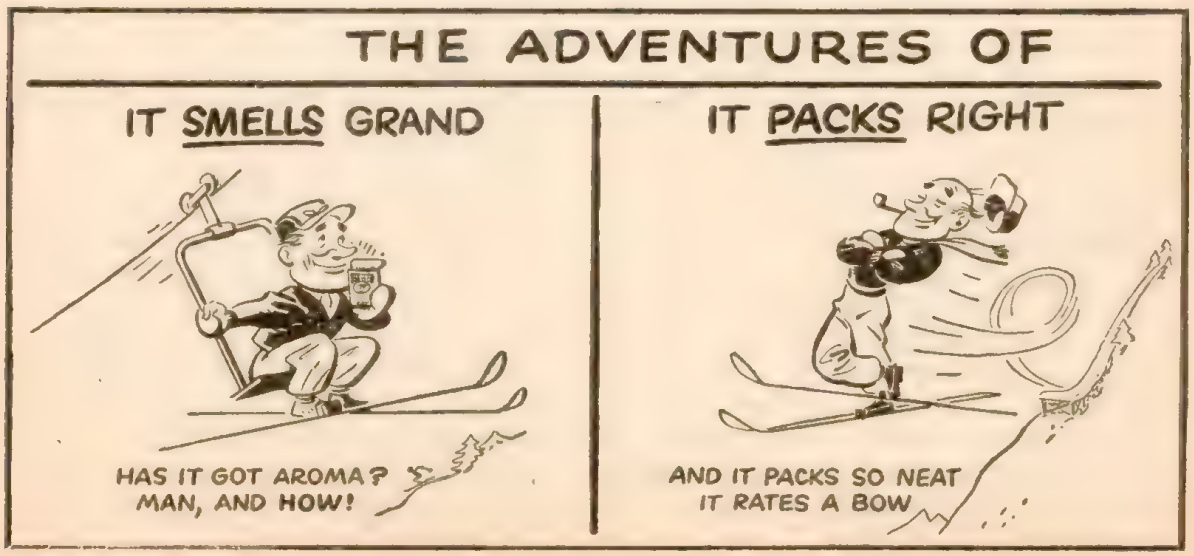
The whaling canoe was fully thirty feet long, with a high prow, across which the sinew rope lay taut as a fiddle string. The vessel turned sharply, disappearing for a moment beneath a battering comber, and then it bore swiftly down on Black Tern. Awareness of his danger came to him, and he dug frantically with his paddle, swiveling the canoe aside. Tern saw the black body of the whale pass beneath him, heard it broach and blow on the other side. Then he felt his craft tossed in the air as the rope came up beneath its bottom.

Black Tern fought beneath the water, clawing for the surface, and then he came up, headgear gone long before, flinging the salt chuck from his eyes. He heard the hiss of the canoe prow as it bore down on him. He dived aside, and strong hands reached out as the canoe passed, hauling him in over the gunwale.

He rolled about in the wallowing confusion of trampling feet, chanting and yelling, shouted orders.

When he sat up, belching water, a fiercely mustached warrior, naked save for a breech clout, as was Black Tern, threatened him with a club.

The most magnificently proportioned man that Black Tern had ever seen thrust



the club brandishing warrior aside, looking closely at the captive. His bronzed features were still, his hooked nose dripping with moisture. His neck and shoulders were corded with muscle, beautifully tattooed in brilliant designs of red and purple. One hand lay on the taut rope, as though he kept his fingers on the conflict with the whale, while he took care of less important matters.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Black Tern, of the Haida Raven," Tern managed to cough out. "I come in peace."

"The Raven of the Haida," the Nootka said contemptuously, "are *kwass* (cowards.) You will make Mad Bear an obedient slave. I will attend to you when we have killed this beast that tows us."

Mad Bear's gaze moved over Black Tern, searching for weapons. He did not see the knife with the long, shining blade, hidden in the folds of Black Tern's breech clout of softly woven cedar bark.

"Back," he said, placing his hand on Black Tern's chest. "This is no work for a Haida woman."

The men in the canoe looked at their chief and wide grins came to their faces. And their eyes went to the whale, which circled now, a hundred yards out, a mountain of flesh, rolling groggily in the wash of the combers.

"It tires," Mad Bear said. "It has made me very angry. I shall take great pleasure in its killing."

MEN gathered in the forepeak, hauling on the rope, pulling the canoe and whale closer together. Others blew on bladders until their weathered cheeks bulged, filling the bladders with air, attaching ropes and harpoons. They went about their business as would a well trained crew, each one attending to his particular duty.

The men with the air-filled bladders lined the nigh rail as the whaling vessel drew near the broached whale. The sea beast lay hardly twenty feet out now. The men rose up on their toes as one, driving down and out with their harpoons. The shafts thudded into the black skinned flesh, as biting rain, and the whale exploded with action.

Its ten-ton tail lashed at the canoe. But the men at the oars were ready, backing away as the harpoons were yet in the air. The striking tail struck the end of the prow a glancing blow, shattering the ornate figure of a whale that rode there.

Mad Bear gave a shout, and Black Tern looked at him, to see the tremendous anger in his face. The Nootka chief sprang to the gunwale, poised there a flickering instant, and then leaped upon the whale's back, grasping the shaft of the main har-

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

IT'S THE PIPE-BLEND CHAMP YOU MUST ALLOW

IT CAN'T BITE!

A BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS, EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. SIR WALTER RALEIGH STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF — NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL.

It costs no more to get the Best!

poon, driving downward again and again with his long, copper bladed knife.

Instantly the whale surged away, lashing out with his tail again, and the blow struck the taut rope, snapping it like rotten thread. The rope sprang from the forepeak of the canoe like a live thing, to wind about the Nootka chief's body, binding him to the upright shaft of the harpoon, which stood out of the mammal's back. The whale sounded. A great sigh went up from the Nootka warriors as they saw their chief disappear beneath the surface.

"*Anah!*" they chanted. "Mad Bear is gone. He will never come up again. The rope holds him."

The Nootka surged to the canoe's prow, peering into the green depths. From his position in the stern, Black Tern saw the dark body pass below him, plowing around the end of the vessel. Mad Bear had called a warrior of the Haida Raven "kwass"—a coward. Black Tern's hand moved down to his breech clout, and the long bladed Boston knife glittered as he dived down toward the onrushing head of the whale, large as a man's house.

Black Tern's outstretched left hand collided with the smooth, slippery skull, and then Mad Bear's body struck Black Tern. Tern wound his left arm around the Nootka chief and held on, slashing at the entangling ropes that held the chief firm against the harpoon shaft, with his right. The knife had been honed on black, Queen Charlotte Island slate, and with it a man could shave off his beard.

There was a thundering in Black Tern's ears, and it seemed to him that he could hold on no longer, go no longer without air. Madly he continued to cut. And then suddenly they were free, shooting toward the surface, locked tightly in each other's arms.

The combers struck them as they emerged into the air. Black Tern was able to give one shout before the comber dropped on them, driving them down. Tern thrust Mad Bear away, twisting him about, feeling the rope, still locking his arms so that he could not swim. He threw an arm about the Nootka chief's neck, and then he clawed upward again. They came out on the side of a comber, and the Nootka men saw them. Black Tern could see their mouths open with their yelling, and then twenty pairs of shoulders were driving the canoe to their rescue.

Black Tern sat in the Nootka whaling canoe, flat on the bottom, with Mad Bear's head in his lap, while the Nootka paddlers drove the vessel toward Vancouver Island. Mad Bear slowly opened his eyes. He lay there, looking into Black Tern's face.

"The Raven," he said, "is *tillicum*. (my friend.) We will have potlatch, a feast with gifts for the Raven *Tyee*. The whale would have borne me to my fathers."

Black Tern found himself to be a hero among the Nootka. To ride the back of a harpooned whale, striking it with your knife, was the highest attainment a warrior could achieve in this fishermen's tribe. To ride it and cut free an entangled chief was something that was beyond anything ever done before.

THROUGH feast and potlatch Black Tern conducted himself as befitted a Raven of the northern Haida, but he hungered to be away. He watched the gods of weather, waiting for them to send him a southwest wind. His canoe was waiting, picked up at sea by the Nootka and towed in. There were many Nootka maidens that looked upon this bronzed warrior from the north with soft eyes. Seeing the far away look that came to Black Tern as he faced the northeast, Mad Bear said to him, "Stay with us, Black Tern. We will adopt you into the Whale Killer Clan, and you will be a chief here, also."

Mad Bear, Black Tern thought, thinks that I am a chief among my people but I am not. I am but the son of a warrior of the Raven. So Black Tern told the Nootka chief of his search for a wife, of Shalish, and of Sea Hawk.

"*Ahnah!*" exclaimed Mad Bear. "The Eagle chief is a fool. If you want this maiden, I will take my warriors north in the spring and get her for you." Mad

Bear swung his war club viciously through the air.

"No!" exclaimed Tern. "I let no man help me to get a wife. I must go alone for Shalish."

"*Kloshe!*" exclaimed Mad Bear. "It is good. I will prepare a better canoe for you, that will take you there with the speed of an arrow."

The fall had deepened into winter now, and the winds howled down the Georgia Strait endlessly. Black Tern chaffed at the bonds that held him here, while the Nootka craftsmen made him a smaller canoe, balanced and streamlined for one man's handling in the sea. Black Tern grew hollow-eyed with the waiting, but finally the geese came back from the south in long, wavering chains.

The soft, southwest wind came at last, and Black Tern went north and east with it. The Nootka followed him a few miles, waving at him in farewell. The Nootka maids had made him robes of the softest feathers, trimmed in ermine and down, and they had piled his canoe for the journey with clams and fish and whale meat.

The sea was touched with dusk when Black Tern finally saw the island of Sea Hawk again. By the time he had drawn close to the land full darkness had come down. The song of the surf was hushed in the lagoon. Tern grounded his craft in the sand of the channel. He took off his fine robes, stripping down to his breech clout, the haft of the Boston knife thrusting out, easy to his hand.

He could see the fire glow from the fire hole of Sea Hawk's house. It was the time of eating and the encampment seemed deserted. Black Tern thrust aside the skins before Sea Hawk's center post, and walked boldly into the room.

The Eagle chief sat cross legged on his mat, his bowl between his knees. Shalish was kneeling beside him, serving him with hot meat. She glanced up and saw Black Tern, and the meat cascaded on to Sea Hawk's leg.

The meat must have burned the old man, but he did not wince, or leap away from it. He slowly brushed it away, his eyes meeting Black Tern's gaze squarely.

"My daughter is careless," he said. "Go away from my house, Raven. I do not hunger to have such a man killed, one who has fought the sea and won."

Black Tern walked across the room. He laid the copper shield that the Nootka had given him, on the mat before Sea Hawk.

"The Eagle," he said softly, "does not invite the traveler to his feast. That is not good."

Sea Hawk's eyes went to the copper shield that lay before him. His eyes grew still, the hands that moved to his food froze where they were. Here lay the copper shield that the fierce Nootka had taken away from his clan, *ahn-kut-ty*, so long ago. It had not brought the five thousand blankets that was its recognized worth. It had been taken in war, and the faces of Sea Hawk's clan had been on the ground. They were not a powerful enough clan to sail south and fight the Nootka. So they had gathered together their combined wealth, and they had bought the lesser copper shield from the Tlingit chief. They had made believe that their faces were no longer on the ground, but it was not so.

"Sit down, my son," Sea Hawk said to Black Tern, "and eat with me. My daughter will serve you."

Shalish came close to Black Tern and she gave him hot meat and broth. Black Tern ate in silence, and then he smacked his lips.

"The daughter of the Eagle *Tyee*," he said, "serves good food. I would be happy to have her in my lodge on Bear Island."

"*Kloshe*," Sea Hawk declared, wiping his long mustache, "so be it—it is good. But I must have this copper shield in payment."

Black Tern looked at Shalish, and she was smiling at him, and with him. She had refused to marry Yellow Mask, she had waited, even though it had been many moons. It was, indeed, as Sea Hawk had said—it was very good. • • •

Cleanup at Crowheart

CHAPTER I

Tough Town

AS THE old Concord coach rocked and sloshed through the knee-deep Cannonball River, Jud Conroy felt his eagerness building up. "Just a whoop'n-a-holler to Crowheart now," he said, grinning at the other passenger.

After turning a jaundiced eye at the sunlit Dakota landscape, the drummer took another look at Jud's dusty weather-faded uniform. "Going on furlough?"

"Nope. Through soldiering." Jud looked happy as a loose pony in an oat-field. "Got my discharge last night. I'm planning to settle in Crowheart."

Looking as though he sure thought Jud's intellect had headed south, the drummer said, "M'God. Why?"

"Why not?" Though ordinarily pleasant as a friendly pup, Jud could tough up fast. "Crowheart's a damn fine little town. Peaceful as a church and is bound to grow, now that the Injuns are quiet and leaving the ranchers alone. I been a saddler in the Eighth Cavalry, and last year when we were moving from Fort Meade up to Fort Yates, we camped near Crowheart and I liked it fine. Made a deal with the harness-maker to go to work for him when my enlistment was up."

"All right." The drummer tossed his cigar-butt out the window. "But I'll tell you this, brother. If you got anything a-tall under that forage cap you won't settle in Crowheart. I'd as lief hole up in a dog-town full of buzz-tail snakes."

Jud began to feel queezy around his insides. "You been there?"

"Sure I've been there. Every two three months I call on Verne Waldrum who runs the general store. But Waldrum's business has been going to hell in a handbasket ever since—well, here we are. You'll see

When the peaceful hamlet where he'd planned to settle down changed to a roaring outpost of hell, Jim Conroy changed too—becoming a tough, man-busting avenger!

A Novelet by **BEN T. YOUNG**

what it's like for yourself."

Having no baggage—just a bundle containing his shaving things and such—Jud didn't have to wait; just stepped out into the dusty street and looked around. He'd seen the place for only a few hours that Sunday a year ago, but it looked the same to him. The late morning sun lay hot on the sawed-lumber buildings— The Custer House just opposite, and the gunsmith's and barber shop.

THERE sure enough weren't any folks in sight, nor any teams nor saddle-ponies at the hitch-rails, save for those two bays dozing before that deadfall called The Tepee. But this was Wednesday, and likely all the ranchers were busy at home. Come Saturday, now—it would be different! That grumpy drummer probably had a sick liver or something. Sore, maybe, because he couldn't sell women's fixings to the storekeeper. Shucks, this was a man's town, and cowtown men would spend money on horse-gear come hell'n high water.

Crossing the street Jud ducked under the hitch-rail and tramped down the plank walk past the jail and resiny-smelling lumber yard. Under a big cottonwood on the creek bank stood the harness shop. Jud bulged in, gulped a deep breath of that air smelling good of leather, neat's-foot oil and wax. "Howdy, Mr. Buell," he sang out, cheery as a coopful of catbirds.

Rising from the bench where he'd been taking his ease, old Barney Buell peered over his specs. "Son, I'm mighty sorry you come," he sighed. "Since we made that deal last summer this town's got too dead even to bury. Business is slower than a worm working through an apple. I don't need no help; can't afford none."

Again Jud got that alkalied feeling and apparently showed it.

"Maybe I should have let you know," Barney went on, "but I ain't no hand to write letters. Anyways, knowing young bucks are changeable as April weather, I figured like as not you'd forgot me."

"Shucks, no. I've been saving my pay and poker-winnings, and counting on coming back here. What's happened?"

Looking sadder than a bloodhound's eye Barney wagged his head. "Come siddown. It's a long story."

It was a doleful tale. All of a sudden and nothing first a tough-as-tripe jasper called Turk Yocum had shown up and bought The Tepee. With its tangle-foot whisky, crooked games and fancy gals, The Tepee always had been right smart of a deadfall; but now it was a place where even a rattlesnake would be ashamed to meet his ma, a hangout for the roughest string of hoodlums between the Missouri and the Black Hills.

Yocum had also run off a nester and established a horse ranch out on the Cannonball's north fork near Three Buttes. That TY ranch, Barney said, was no more than a market for stolen horses run in from Montana and Wyoming. Two rake-hells called Rowdy Debolt and Hank Getz ran the outfit, backed by a crew of lead-slingers which, by comparison, made the Sioux of Sitting Bull days seem like a bunch of sissies.

"They've plumb took over the town, that Yocum gang," Barney mourned, tossing his cud of Brown Mule into the sand-box. "I ain't seen sech goings-on since I worked fer the stage company down in Deadwood. The decent ranchers are a-scared to trade here now. Even The Custer House has had to close its kitchen and just rent rooms. Damn, if so many years hadn't a-stacked up on me, I'd pull stakes and start in somewhere else. All the other fellers like Waldrum, Obermeyer and Melchoir feel the same way. Take my advice, son, and drift."

"But why do the good folks here stand for it?" Jud asked. "Ain't there no law?"

"Law, hell! North Dakota's been a state less than a year, and already it's shot full of politics. We ain't seen the county sheriff or a deputy in months. Now we got a town marshal with more sand than flapjacks mixed in a windstorm; but like me, Ansel Patch don't run like a colt no more and can't stay up round the clock. He's tried to find a dependable young feller to help him out, and Crowheart businessmen

have been willing to pay the cost; but decent young jiggers, seems like, don't crave to try their hands at gentling Yocum."

For a long moment Jud sat staring into the bowl of his pipe. Then he said, "If this trouble was ironed out, business would pick up again, wouldn't it?"

Barney nodded. "Sure as sunup. But who the hell's a-going to tackle the job?"

"Me. And if I don't get put to bed with a shovel doing it, I want in here with you when the job's done. For a year I been planning to settle in Crowheart, someday buy you out, build me a house and maybe take a wife. I don't aim to change my mind."

"Go see Patch, then. He's cantankerous as a sore-eared dog, but a man to tie to in all kinds of weather. Tell him I sent ye."

LEAVING his bundle, Jud went outside. The sun was now at high center and he sure felt gloomy. But he probably could enjoy his victuals better if he got this business settled first. After passing the lumber yard again he took a closer look at the jail, a sod-roofed little outfit built of stone. A doorway off the walk let him into a dingy office; and behind a deal table serving as a desk sat a stringy old smooth-bore whose frosty eyes were blue and hard as lake ice in mid-winter.

Having introduced himself, Jud stated his business; and Ansel Patch promptly shook his head. "You ain't got the earmarks of a fighter. Too easy-goin'. Once you tangled with them bobcats, we'd have to scrape you up with a hoe."

Not wanting to do any boasting, Jud didn't sound off about the times he'd knocked the clabber out of tough roosters in Cheyenne when he was learning his trade under F. A. Meaney, and how he'd been one of the best revolver shots at Fort Yates. He just said, "Give me a try."

Again Patch shook his head. "I don't question your nerve, but soldiers is used to fighting as one of a pack, and this is a lone-wolf job with the odds always against you. You'd only get shot full of holes as a woman's lace collar, and respect fer the law would go down another notch."

"From what I hear it's hit bottom now." Jud was getting riled again. "Maybe you're a-feared I'd really start something and you'd get sucked into it. Maybe that badge and gun are just ornaments."

As though a hornet had smacked into his tail-gate, Patch jumped up. "Rattle your hocks out of here!" he roared. "Go on, get!"

Jud did so. *Now what?* he wondered. Maybe he'd have to hit the trail in search of another location, or go back to soldiering. But, doggone-it, this Crowheart setup would sure be nice if these fly-blown hoodlums could be run out. And they could be, if the townsfolk had sand enough to scour a skillet.

Suddenly recalling some appetizing odors around that hash-house next the stage station, he recrossed the street and entered. It was a small layout, but clean as a mess-hall just before inspection. He'd no more than clapped his cap onto a nail when a girl appeared from the kitchen. "Howdy, ma'am." He grinned and sat down at the long oilcloth-covered table. "Looks like I got the place to myself."

Morosely she nodded. "Business isn't good. Do you want the dinner?"

"Please," he said, noting that even in that long calico dress and starchy apron a man could tell she was a well-set-up piece. Pretty hair, too; red as the upper half of a troop guidon.

Then he fell to thinking of his troubles again, and paid her no more heed as she brought his food. "That will be four bits," she said, and took the silver dollar he fished from his pocket.

Just as she returned with the change, two ponies charged up to the hitch-rail and their riders came clattering on inside. "Howdy, Red," the first one whooped, reaching for her.

Nimbly evading his hairy paws, she backed toward the kitchen doorway. "You both want dinner?" she asked tonelessly.

"Want a kiss, first." Again Hairy Paw started for her; and when she slammed the door in his face he kicked it with his spurred boot, and what he said wasn't very genteel.

As the other jasper guffawed, Jud flicked a glance his way and saw that the ponies they'd ridden were the bays he had noticed before The Tepee. From the corner of his eye he saw that the first buzzard was waiting by the kitchen door, ready to grab the redhead when she reappeared.

"Maybe, friend, she don't want to be kissed," he said mildly.

At once the air in the room seemed to change. A cold tightness got into it, and a stir of excitement brushed across Jud's feelings.

"You buyin' chips in this game, soldier?" Two strides had brought the fellow to Jud's side.

JUD gathered his legs beneath his chair. A tough edged smile flickered along his lips. He knew the second fellow had cat-footed around behind him now, and both wore guns. But, what the hell? "Suppose I am," he said, rising leisurely. "What then?"

Quick as powder he kicked back the chair and ducked the vicious swipe of a swung gun-barrel. His rock-hard left smashed into the gunman's mouth, knocking him against a small-paned window which went out in a shower of splintered wood and glass and potted geraniums.

Then a Colt roared behind him and something hot and stinging furrowed his ribs. Flinging himself sidewise to avoid a second slug, he took the table over with a crash.

At once one of the two roughs was on Jud's back, a pair of hands groping for his throat. Writhing and threshing he fought to get free. "Stop it!" he heard the girl cry.

Somehow Jud managed to get an arm loose and lurched forward along the floor. The point of his elbow rammed a windpipe. A hoarse rasping breath was loosed, the hold on him slackened and he twisted away.

Jumping up he vaulted the overturned table, grabbed a chair and smashed it on the fellow's head. As he dived back over the table a bullet tore off one of his heels, and another fanned his chin as he grabbed the fallen man's gun.

His first shot tore up the forearm of Hairy Arm. The hoodlum spun with the jolt of it, his gun clattering to the floor.

Jud was on him like a bobcat, but before he could beat him to doll-rags, the cold muzzle of another gun was jabbed against his neck. "I told you to stop it," the girl said. "Get up."

Jud's breath was coming in great tearing gasps and his bloody side was one searing pain. Turning his head he stared up into a pair of green eyes that sure showed war. "What the hell?" he panted.

Then he saw the eyes go past him as a step sounded in the doorway. "Marshal," she said, lowering the gun. "I want this soldier jailed. He started a fight."

"Sure, I started a fight!" Jud staggered to his feet. "These rancid weasels were tormenting—"

"I could have handled them without tearing up the place!" she stormed. "Just see what you've done!"

CHAPTER II

Tin Star

LEANING against the wall, Jud looked around through the hanging powder-smoke. Broken glass, china and furniture; spilled food and smears of blood; and two human wrecks still down.

Patch was having his grim look too, and when he'd finished he turned to the small crowd gathered about the doorway.

"Koury," Patch said, "go tell Yocum to send over here after Debolt and Getz. They're fixed fer slow travelin'."

"If they're some of that pack, now's your chance to jug 'em," Jud growled.

"You started it," the girl insisted. "Marshal, he should be made to pay for the damage."

"Come along," Patch ordered, taking Jud's arm. "First, we'll see the doctor."

When they'd rounded the corner and headed up a short side street, Patch released Jud's arm. "Well, you turned out to be hell on high red wheels, didn't you."

"Got my tail in a crack and no thanks for it," Jud grumbled. "Who is that wrong-headed filly?"

"Nora Shattuck, but don't blame her none for getting bushy-tailed. Since her old man cashed in—he was one of the stage-drivers—she'd been trying to make a living off that eating-house, and to see it taken apart like a busted watch, sort of riled her."

"But, doggone it, those bums—"

"I know. She don't hold with that riff-raff any more than you or I do, but they're always gandering around and she tolerates 'em up to a point because they're customers. Right now customers is scarcer than flowers on a Christmas tree. When she cools off some she'll see you done right. Well, here's Doc's place."

While painful, Jud's wound didn't amount to much, not a circumstance to the knife-cut a drunken Sioux had given him over at the Standing Rock Agency; and, when it was dressed, he and Patch headed back to the main street. But, instead of crossing it to the jail, Patch turned him into Waldrum's general store.

"Verne," Patch said to the proprietor, "this here tore-up outfit is Jud Conroy. Fix him up with clothes, on jawbone, if necessary."

"Now wait a minute," Jud protested. "I need clothes like Death Valley needs water, but let's see first how much that dust-up yonder is going to cost me."

"Not a cent, bub. It earned you that deputy job you craved. Buy yourself a gun, too; and some cartridges. Then come over to my office and we'll make medicine."

Jud's lower lip had been hanging like a blacksmith's apron. "Well, you never can tell which way a dill pickle's going to squirt," he said when Patch had clumped out. "Let me see some California pants."

When he'd got all fitted out in his new clothes—making the change in the warehouse behind the store—he selected a gun, one of the new double-action .45's designed by Colt for the Army.

"I wish you luck with it," Waldrum sighed dubiously. "Those fellows you tangled with in the restaurant are Yocum's toughest, and they won't rest till your hide's hung on a fence. I'm afraid you've uncorked a bull-size ruckus."

"Sorry?" Jud was filling the cartridge loops on his new belt.

Looking worried as a bull-frog waiting for rain, Waldrum shrugged. "Mettle's dangerous in a blind horse. Maybe you don't see what an all-out fight will do to this town."

"It's the only cure for what ails it, Waldrum. And I'd be obliged if you'd cache this money-belt in your safe."

"What disposition shall I make of it, in case—"

"Barney Buell; or maybe half to that redhead if she'll take it. Now, where's a cobbler to put a new heel on this boot?"

AGAIN in the marshal's office, he got his badge and arranged to shack up with Patch in a log house behind the jail. And he learned of the town's few laws, and the fact that the local magistrate was no more than a peace justice who held court in the back room of Urban Zinn's barber shop and was so buffaloed by the hoodlums that he was worse than useless.

"Then why let law get in the way of justice?" Jud asked. "Why not organize the decent jaspers into a vigilante outfit with hangropes?"

"Try it," Patch growled. "I've two three times called on them to lend a hand, but they're too all-fired scared of getting cross-wise of them politicans at the county-seat and being jailed by the sheriff. And don't get *your* self belt-deep in trouble by setting foot outside the town limits when on duty. Our jurisdiction ends—" He mentioned the town's boundaries.

It began to seem to Jud that he'd sawed off a job on himself, undertaking to set this place to rights when all the cards were stacked against him. He was still more dispirited to learn that even some of the decent citizens weren't too anxious for a

cleanup. Barney Buell, of course, was hundred proof; as were Ed Melchoir, who owned the livery; and Luke Obermeyer, the blacksmith. They made some money off the hoodlums but preferred to deal with solid folks. Verne Waldrum would too, but Verne was a timid citizen, inclined to leave well enough alone rather than haul trouble out of its shuck.

"The doctor and gunsmith and barber, now, are different," Patch explained. "They're good enough fellers but their business is thriving. And the stage company hands have got no stake here and don't give a damn. Nope, you and I will have to do the job alone."

"Well, a wolf hunts with what teeth he's got," Jud sighed. "Reckon you'll want me on nights."

Patch nodded. "Six till six. Better get some sleep now. Use my bunk till we can knock together another one and rustle some blankets."

Shortly Jud had got his bundle from Barney Buell's place and was in the shack, but before turning in he took the new Colt apart and oiled and honed the sear to ease the trigger pull. That done he napped a while; then, by way of reconnaissance, sauntered down to The Tepee and stepped inside the bat-wing doors.

It was the usual set-up, a barn-like room with a full-length bar and the customary grouping of poker tables and other gambling layouts. There was a small space for dancing, and a raised platform at the rear on which stood a spavined old piano. Save for the flies, one bartender, and the players at a poker table, the place was empty.

"Yocum in?" Jud asked the bartender.

For a moment the man's slitted eyes took in the newcomer's badge and gun. "Back yonder," he said, jerking his head toward the rear.

Behind the stage was a storeroom with one corner partitioned off as an office. There Jud found Yocum seated at a battered desk; a blocky man, dark and tough, with a scar on his cheek put there by somebody who wasn't fooling. "Yocum," Jud said, leaning easily against the jamb of the open doorway. "I'm the new deputy marshal. Thought we'd best get acquainted. My name is Conroy."

Yocum's face was inscrutable as an Indian's, but Jud knew those snake-like eyes were measuring him through the drifting tobacco smoke. "So we're going to have law and order," Yocum said around his soggy cigar.

Jud nodded. "Starting now."

"What makes you so sure?"

FIGURING to let the hoodlums figure that out, Jud ignored the question. "This noon-time," he drawled, "a brace of your tough roosters got their tails over the dash-board in the eating-house yonder. The place was torn up considerable, and I'd admire to see Miss Nora Shattuck get something to pay for fixing it up again. I figure sixty bucks would about do it. I'm chipping in twenty."

"Why not arrest them, have the girl make a complaint, and let the court assess damages?"

Jud shook his head. "From what I hear that court ain't worth shucks till we get a new justice. Meantime, the girl needs the cash."

After a long dragged-out moment, Yocum drew a wad of bills from his pants pocket. "Well, I guess she needs the money, all right," he growled, peeling off four tens. "But don't get the idea—"

"I already got my ideas." Jud took the proffered bills. "And pass the word to your hands and customers that the kind of yelling hell they've been raising don't go any more."

"That a threat?"

Jud wagged his head. "Just serving notice, Yocum."

It was nearing six o'clock so he checked in with Patch, got the jail keys and sauntered across to Nora Shattuck's for his supper, being right glad to find her alone.

The look she gave him would have blighted a cactus. "I guess it does take a tough to handle other toughs," she said, eying his star and gun. "But no more fighting in here, understand? I just now got through cleaning the mess up, and I'll have to have a new window-sash put in and buy

some more dishes and a chair."

"Yes'm. I guess Yocum's right sorry his boys did that a-way. He chipped in to help cover the damage."

Nora's eyes stood out on stems. "He never did!"

"Yes'm, here it is."

"Well, that just goes to show that there is *some* good in everybody. But he shouldn't pay it all. You started the whole—"

"Ma'am," Jud cut in, "you hang to an idea like an Injun to a jug of scamper-juice. My twenty bucks is in there. Now if you'll just fetch me some supper I'll be obliged."

Rancher Romance

Her brand was a simple U,
And mine an S, no fuss—
So we put them both together,
Now she and I are—US!

—*Pecos Pete*

With nose high as a turkey's tail, Nora marched into the kitchen, and when she'd returned with his food he said, "You're a good cook."

"Thank you," she snapped, short as the tail-hold on a bear.

"I'll keep you in mind."

"For what?"

Jud started to eat his steak and potatoes. "When I get this town set to rights I aim to settle down and take a wife. You're a mite cross-grained, but—" He grinned as she again slammed out, and when she returned—at the entrance of two bearded freighters—she paid him no more heed at all.

With cigar alight he strolled about the town. Having had a look inside The Tepee, he now wanted to get the layout of the back yards, sheds and so-on, knowledge that would be helpful in the dark. Toward dusk he finally came to rest on the bench before the now-closed barber shop right next The Tepee.

Before long a bunch of rowdy-looking riders came charging up to the hitch-rail before The Tepee, left their ponies and went in. Though the light was failing he was quite sure neither Debolt nor Getz were among them, and he wondered where they'd holed up for repairs. Sure as sunup they'd try for his scalp at the first chance, and he'd have to keep his eyeballs oiled. He hoped they wouldn't be long in making their try, for that would drop the bottom out of the tub and settle things one way or the other.

SOMEBODY had begun to pound that tinny piano in there now, and a fiddle and accordion joined in, doing things to a tune called "After the Ball." It wasn't much for music but hell for stout, and now he could hear the shuffling of feet and the voices of women.

That brought Nora Shattuck to mind, and the thought kicked a hard emotion through him. "Damn," he muttered, put out with himself; knowing the need for keeping his mind off such subjects till this business was done with.

Singly and in pairs a few more riders had drifted into town and disappeared through the deadfall doorway, and now and again a man—probably a gambler—afoot would make the short trip from The Custer House. The goings-on were just now orderly enough; but Jud knew from experience that cards, whisky and women made a hell's brew that could blow up any minute. And right then it did.

The slam of a six-gun momentarily hushed the racket yonder. Then came hoarse shouts and a woman's scream. Quick as a flash, Jud was off the bench, headed for the doorway. Just outside he slowed to a casual walk and—with thumbs hooked in his waistband—strolled in. As the doors swung to behind him he stopped.

Through the fog of tobacco smoke he saw that the musicians were gone, the barkeeps had grabbed up shotguns; and gamblers, patrons and fancy gals were flattened against the walls. Smashed glass from a hanging-lamp lay on the dance-floor.

CHAPTER III

Tough Policy

CASUALLY leaning back against the bar stood a lanky man with a tied-down gun at each hip. He was regarding Jud with the cold watchful eyes of a faro dealer.

Having smelled rats before, Jud knew the scent; knew this was a trumped-up ruckus and the dice were loaded. "You fire that shot, friend?" he asked, sauntering toward the gun-hung trouble-hunter.

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm askin' the questions here." Jud kept right on walking. At every step strain piled up in him. Tension pulled at the muscles of his lean belly. Any instant that jasper would go for his guns; and from his looks he was quicker than a mule's kick, too damned fast for Jud.

Save for the soft sound Jud's boots made on the sawdust-covered floor it was quiet as a graveyard at night. After a minute that seemed like an hour to Jud, he stopped an arm-length away from the baleful eyes. Then the awful silence was broken by the nervous titter of a girl. The gunman's eyes wavered. Jud stepped in.

As the fellow's hands dropped to his gun-butts, Jud's right exploded on the stubbled chin, smashing the top of the man's torso backward over the bar's edge. Slamming against him Jud pinned him there, grabbed the guns and bounced back. But there was no more fight in the tough. Limp as a wet bar-rag, he slowly slid sidewise to the floor.

"Judas!" an awed bartender gasped.

Facing the bulk of the crowd but paying them no heed, Jud spilled the loads from the captured guns and tossed the whole works on the floor against the bar. Again hooking his thumbs in his waistbelt, he turned to the nearest barkeep. "Tell Yocum I meant what I said." Then he sauntered back toward the door.

He was scared, all right; scared as a rabbit in a wolf's mouth. But he had to do it this way. Right now he had the Indian sign on this bunch. They were stunned. But the spell wouldn't last long, and a show of fear on his part would end it pronto.

Not till he was clear of the place and down before The Custer House did he relax, and the afterclap was bad. His legs shook. He felt like upchucking his supper. But the nausea passed and he let himself into the jail office. "Whew!" he sighed, sitting down in the welcome darkness and rubbing his bruised knuckles.

Hour after hour he sat there, ears cocked, watching the dark street and wondering if his side was bleeding again. And he was thinking. It was now plain as a mule's ears that he couldn't do this job with the deuce-high hand he was holding. Not fearing the law one bit, this Yocum gang was playing for keeps. They wouldn't rest till he was out of the way; they'd kill him, likely, before the week was out. He right-quick needed some real authority besides that vested in him locally, authority that would permit him to run the hoodlums down outside the town, and that would give the timid citizens the nerve to side him when the pay-off came.

Once again before dawn he patroled the streets, found even The Tepee dark as the inside of a black boot, then settled down to wait for Patch.

When the old marshal heard of the ruckus he shook his head. "You done good, son," he said. "But you got away with it only because them others was too flabbergasted to move. They won't bother no more to set a trap and put on a show; they'll jest plain shoot you down."

"Got any idea who that rough customer

was, a lanky outfit with a narrow head and close-set eyes?"

PATCH nodded. "Calls himself Koury, and he's a hard formation. Blowed in six-eight weeks ago and has a room at The Custer House. Hangs out at The Tepee, but I don't think he's on Yocum's payroll. He's got all the earmarks of a professional killer who's holed up here till things quiet down somewheres else. Sure as hell can scorch a feather Yocum offered him something to rub you out, and because you outfoxed him, he'll be on the prod. You still want this job?"

"No, I don't." Jud grinned wryly. "But I bought chips in the game and I'll stick. Now here's what I'd like to do." Briefly he outlined his plan, got Patch's approval and went home to police up. He got his own breakfast, too; then visited the doctor and had his wound dressed. Finally, he strolled up to The Custer House to try something he hadn't mentioned to Patch lest the old fellow call him a fool.

"Koury in?" he asked a woman sweeping down the stairs.

After slanting a nervous glance at his gun, she jerked a thumb upward. "Third room on the left."

"Koury?" he called softly, rapping on the door.

The "Who is it?" was about as reassuring as the whirring rattle of a buzz-tail snake.

Jud knew he was crowding his luck, but dogged if he was going to tuck tail now. "Conroy," he said after stepping aside. "I want to palaver a little."

Somewhat to his surprise nothing untoward happened. In fact, after some shuffling about inside, the lock grated and the door opened. With heart crowding his back teeth Jud stepped in. Koury, with a cigarette pasted to his lower lip, his stringy frame encased in the underwear in which he'd slept, was seated on the edge of the rumpled bed. Right before him, on the seat of a wooden chair, lay his two unholstered guns.

"Howdy," Jud said with an airiness he sure didn't feel.

After a moment of regarding him with his deadly eyes, Koury seemed to relax a little. "Brother," he growled, "you got more guts than could be hung on a fence. What made you think I wouldn't fill you so full of lead, you couldn't tip over?"

"Why should you?"

"That wallop on the chin. It cost me a hundred bucks."

Jud grinned, folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "Don't ever lay a bet without a look at your hole card."

"Hell, I hadn't made any bets. Yocum—" Then he buttoned his lip.

"I know," Jud said. "And I suppose the offer still holds."

Koury nodded. "But you can rest easy, so far's I'm concerned. While I was out like a lamp you could have pistol-whipped me or tramped on my face or—"

"Likely those other buzzards would have cut me down."

"Hell, from what I hear they was stunned like ducks in thunder, plumb paralyzed. No, you had your chance, Conroy, and didn't take it; so I'm beholden to you. Now what you after?"

"Just this, Koury. I hired out to help bring order in this town. If you'd go elsewhere, there'd be one less tough pelican to tussle with."

An ever rougher expression tumbled over Koury's face. "Why should I pull foot?"

"For your health. It's my guess you're on the dodge, but some day your luck will run out and you'll wind up a-dangling from a scaffold. There's trouble buildin' up here, trouble that even that crooked sheriff yonder will have to take notice of and do something about. Could be that even a U. S. Marshal will come snooping around. Meantime, suppose I'm killed by a bushwhacker. Yocum could point to you as the likely one to have done it, and you'd have still something more to answer for. But if you were somewhere else when it happened; in Belle Fourche, say, or—" There he let it hang.

GINGERLY fingering his swollen discolored chin, Koury looked down at

his guns. "I don't scare easy, Conroy."

Knowing that a little wind kindles while much puts out the fire, Jud straightened and reached for the door-knob. "Well, think it over, anyhow. So long."

Down on the walk again he looked at his watch, then crossed the street to the stage station and bought passage to Fort Yates.

"Didn't stay long," the station keeper remarked dryly.

Jud just grunted, pocketed his change and went out; and when the coach came, and fresh horses had been hooked on, he climbed up beside Mitch Ireland, the driver. As they pulled away, he saw the redhead standing in the open door of the eating-house, and gravely raised his hat. And he was pleased, too, with the look of dismay on her face.

"Didn't you ride in here with me yesterday?" Mitch asked after they had lined out.

Jud said that he had, and remarked casually that Crowheart beat anything he'd ever seen for hell-raising. Mitch agreed to that; then, suddenly wary, shut up tight as a mussel shell. I can't find out anything from this old rumdum, Jud told himself, and when they'd pulled into Chalk Butte he moved inside the coach and slept all the way to Fort Yates.

After he'd had dinner with the sutler, and sidestepped all manner of questions as to why he was back, he hunted up his old troop commander, Captain Wiltse Metcalf, who happened to be Officer of the Day. "Sir," Jud said, "I'd take it as a great favor if the Captain would go with me to the post commander and recommend that he give me a letter to—" Quickly he outlined the situation at Crowheart, and how he proposed to remedy it.

"You're playing in luck today," Captain Metcalf told him. "Instead of trailing on up to Bismark with a letter, you can wait right here. That U. S. Marshal is due in on the afternoon stage to get a civilian prisoner from our guard-house. We'll talk to him."

It took right strong medicine to convince that crusty old lawman, but Captain Metcalf took a hand and eventually Jud got what he wanted: a temporary appointment as a deputy U. S. Marshal. Now, by Judas, Jud Conroy had some real authority; he ranked hell out of the county sheriff, and could fight the hoodlums where he found them. The following forenoon he was back in Crowheart.

Well satisfied with the outcome of the trip, Patch straightway got Barney Buell and the other dependable menfolks into his office for a talk. "Now we can make war," he told them. "And when this deputy U. S. Marshal calls on you for help, you needn't be scared of that two-bit sheriff because President Benjamin Harrison will be backing you."

"What are your plans, Conroy?" Waldrum asked nervously.

"There'll be no peace here till they're run out," Jud declared. "We'll have to find some legal reason for doing so, then move in on 'em. Your local laws and J. P. court don't faze 'em, or the state laws either; but the Marshal said that if I can uncover some violation of a Federal law — now or in the past — on the part of Yocum or his top hands, we'll have 'em between a rock and a hard place. We may have to whittle the gang down little by little; or maybe, with luck, take 'em like the Injuns took Custer. Right now, though, I've got to get some sleep." . . .

It was well along in the shank of the afternoon when he again appeared on the street and strolled down to The Tepee. This time he found Yocum jawing a bartender. "Listen, mister," Jud said, up and down as a cow's tail. "I'm workin' for Uncle Sam now. If anything happens to me, he'll want to know why. Remember that." Out he stalked before Yocum found an answer.

IN THE eating-house, he joined a drummer and a stage company employee at the table; but they were wolfing down their pie, and hauled out about time Nora brought his steak and potatoes. "I notice you were real put out to see me leaving yesterday," he said, solemn as a miner tamping a hole full of blasting powder.

"I was real put out to see you come

back," she snapped, her color flaring like a brush fire.

"So you were watching, eh? Expect you're afraid I'll get hurt."

"You will, all right. I heard about that brawl in the barroom. If you like to fight so well, why didn't you stay in the Army?"

Jud kept his eyes on the biscuit he was buttering. "Business is sort of slow with the Army just now. Besides, like I told you, I crave to have a house and red-headed kids with a red-headed mother—"

The way she flounced into the kitchen and slammed the door behind her was a caution. It shook the whole shebang. And Jud was shaken too, but not by the slam. Just thinking of the doggone filly always got him to working inside like fizz water. He'd better just spend his spare time staying away from her till through with this Yocum business.

At the livery barn he found the old hostler sweeping down the aisle between the stalls. "Koury keep a horse here?" he asked.

The gaffer spat and wagged his head. "Not no more. Fetched a little jag of groceries from Waldrum's store, rolled 'em in his slicker and left out last evening. Good riddance, I say. This town's getting a tight feeling, like a drumhead too long in the sun. Something's a-going to bust."

Jud felt it too, like when the wind blows steadily for days on end and a man's nerves get to twanging like banjo strings. He'd be right glad when the chance came to kick the lid off and have it over.

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CHAPTER IV

Clean Up

THAT evening, he sat alone in the dark office, not expecting any real trouble tonight, not until Yocum had had time to figure out how to dispose of a deputy U. S. Marshal without getting snarled in his own loop. And that went for Getz and Debolt, too.

And Jud wondered about Koury, a little surprised that the trigger-quick tough had pulled out. If he had. That kind of gent usually talked with a forked tongue, and it could be he hadn't meant what he said—or changed his mind—about being grateful for his whole head and undamaged face. Maybe his leaving had just been a stall; and he might be coyoting round again, watching for a chance at Marshal Conroy.

Then, in spite of trying not to, Jud fell to thinking about the redhead. Starting as a full-of-juice young Kansas farmhand he'd gandered around considerable. There'd been honky-tonk gals, and decent ones like the sergeant-major's daughter at Fort Meade, and the visiting niece of the sutler at Yates. Never, though, had anything in skirts given him the buck-thumps like this peppery outfit with the eating-house. From all signs so far she'd likely rear back like a bogged mule at the idea of throwing in with him, and maybe she couldn't be talked into it; but he was going to have to try anyway, if he lived through this scrap he'd started.

Twice during the dark hours he prowled around, and found everything peaceful as a church. A bobcat crouches before he springs, he told himself. Tomorrow night will come the showdown.

"Quiet as a ghost town," he yawned when Patch relieved him; then, after feeding himself, grabbed a few hours sleep.

Later, at the barber shop he bought a bath and a shave, and went to the post office in the corner of Waldrum's store.

Sure enough there was a package for him containing his badge from the marshal and an assortment of *Wanted* notices. Straightway he hunted up Patch and, in the jail office, they studied them with interest. Jud hadn't been around long enough to have even seen some of the hoodlums, but Patch knew them all.

"Here," Patch said, "is one Scorp Bogardus, alias Butch Lannon, wanted for killing an express messenger on a Northern Pacific train, and breaking jail and shooting a sheriff down at Broken Bow in Nebraska. From the description, that's Koury."

And there was one that tallied with Debolt's make-up, and another which Patch said could well be a jasper called Schutt who chored around the T Y layout.

"Hell," Jud growled. "I was hoping Yocum was wanted."

Patch shook his head. "That buzzard's too smooth. He's the kind who hires the dirty work done, and goes scot free. Anyhow, you can try tying onto them others. Koury, alone, is wanted a thousand dollars' worth."

"Too late." Jud's grin was wry as he put the papers back in his pocket. "I advised him to move along, and I guess he did. However, while I could use the money, I'm more interested in chousing the bunch out. Maybe, in trying to take Debolt, I'll bring on an all-out fight and have to plug Yocum in self-defense. With him gone, the rest would scatter like prairie-chickens. Well, I'll see you later."

He knew it was a risky thing he was going to do now, but he wanted to scout the country out Three Buttes way and get a look at that T Y spread. To avoid having his thoughts knocked more ways than a hoptoad can jump, he stayed away from Nora Shattuck and got himself a bite to eat. Then, at the livery barn, rented a big dun gelding and started, drifting out across the prairie south of town instead of toward Three Buttes.

Larks were whistling, jackrabbits jumping out of the buffalo grass, and the hot sun brought out the pungent odor of the sage. It was altogether a fine day, a day a man could enjoy if his nerves weren't tight as dried rawhide.

WHEN screened from the town by the rolling hills, he swung west, then north, avoiding the skyline lest some T Y rider see a lone off-the-road traveler and get inquisitive. Shimmering in the heat the three closely-grouped buttes ahead had the unreal look of paper buttes set on a stage's rim. Considering what might happen there, they gave him sort of a spooky feeling.

Finally, from the head of a draw, he glimpsed a meandering line of cottonwoods which meant a stream, and probably the T Y buildings. After working closer he left the dun, edged to the crest of a rise and took a look. A thousand-odd yards away stood a few log shacks with sod roofs, and a couple of corrals. A man was shading himself beside one of the buildings, and a group of riders were lining out toward town, probably to get an early start raising their Saturday night hell.

Swinging aboard again, Jud circled to the west, crossed the stream and got to the far side of the buttes. Leaving the dun in a coulee he angled a little way up a shale-covered slope and hunkered down, his eyes poking for distance over the broken country off toward the Montana line. Perhaps he'd spot a horse band or two.

Up there the wind was strong and noisy, and he had just tugged his hat on tighter when he glimpsed a movement at his left and a jeering voice called, "Keep your paws away from the gun, Marshal!" Debolt appeared from behind a boulder. "Come up behind him, Schutt, and take that fine new Colt."

Jud had felt a lash of fear tear through him. He wished he could keep his teeth from rattling like a box of dice.

"Hell, let's drill him, Rowdy, and get done with it," Schutt growled.

"Shut up and grab his gun. We'll take him to the ranch. Turk will want in on this. You've sort of curried Turk the wrong way, Marshal. He'll likely want to fix your wagon his own self; and Getz don't like what you done to his arm, neither."

Jud felt his Colt lifted from its holster and, when told to get to his feet and move down to his horse and get aboard, he had no out but to obey. Debolt kept him covered while Schutt brought up their own ponies. Then, all mounted, they started; Jud ahead and the two following a few yards behind.

He couldn't hear their muttered conversation but judged that they felt so sure of him that they weren't very watchful. Turning his head one way and then the other he saw, from the corners of his eyes, that both had holstered their guns and were building smokes. Abrupt as a thunderclap he whirled the dun and charged, heading at the narrow space between them.

With a crash the dun hit Debolt's bay, knocking it hell-west-and-crooked in a heap. The belated shot Debolt fired went upward. As Debolt went tail-over-brisket off the bay, he dropped his gun.

Fighting his startled roan, Schutt turned in his saddle and fired. He missed. By then Jud was off the dun. Grabbing up Debolt's dropped gun he fired from hip level at Schutt. With a yelp Schutt spilled off sidewise, and the roan went bucking away.

Whirling, Jud saw that Debolt—panicked without a weapon—had got his bay to its feet and gained the saddle. But the fall had knocked the rigging loose and it slipped. With a foot caught in the stirrup Debolt fell beneath the iron-shod hoofs, and the frantic bay dragged him yonder.

Bleeding at the right shoulder, Schutt was flat as a stovelid. His gun had dropped from his hand, and Jud's Colt was still in the waistband of his jeans. After securing both guns, Jud touched Schutt with his foot. "Can you make it to town?"

Opening his still-full-of-hate eyes Schutt nodded. Quickly catching up the now-grazing roan, Jud knotted the reins and looped them over the saddle-horn. "Hang on with your good hand," he ordered, helping Schutt aboard.

"Where's Rowdy?"

"Dead. Come along."

SMOKE from the supper fires was lifting from the chimneys as they rode into town. Telling a gawping kid to get his eyeballs back in their sockets and fetch the doctor to the jail, Jud locked his prisoner in one of the four cells.

As Patch heard the story his face turned tough. "Tonight's the night, then," he said, checking the loads in a shotgun. "Before long they'll miss them two, find Debolt, and go looking for Schutt. It's likely Yocum has already been told you brought in a prisoner, and they'll wild up and try to spring this buzzard. You got the authority now, so go call on Barney and them for help in guarding this shebang and whatever. Tell Waldrum to sell no ammunition to nobody without an order from you, and close up that damn gunsmith's for the night. He ain't to be trusted. Better post a guard there. We'll pass the word fer all women and kids to stay indoors."

As Jud went about those chores he saw that the hitch-rails were crowding up with ponies. Likely every wild cowhand for miles around would be in town by nightfall. Already there was a still tightness in the air as though folks sensed the imminence of a showdown. And in the west a storm was building up. Lightning flickered against black clouds, and thunder rumbled like the guns of distant artillery.

Feeling the need for coffee and a bait of grub, Jud approached the eating-house from the rear. The back door was open and he rapped on the casing. "Ma'am," he said when Nora appeared. "Would you mind feeding me in the kitchen? Up front I might get crosswise of somebody and tear the place up again."

There was no sweetness in the look he got, but she nodded and he followed her inside. "Don't bother none," he said quietly. "Just hand me a plate and I'll rest my coffee on this window-sill."

He ate hurriedly and with ears cocked, hearing talk up front but unable to get the gist of it. Paying him no heed Nora came and went; but finally, when he was finishing his coffee, she came beside him and put her lips close to his ear. "Be careful," she warned. "Debolt's body has been found, and they've learned about Schutt. They—"

"Hey, Red!" a tipsy voice yelled, and she hurried away.

Her show of concern, her warm nearness, and the fragrance of her hair stirred up thoughts in Jud that were best left till later. Grabbing his hat, he left. What with the big thunderheads screening the last of the sunset glow it was almost dark as he went out through the flower-filled back yard and circled around the stage station to the street.

He'd tied the thongs of his holster about his thigh, and now he loosed the Colt in the leather and tugged down his hat. Other than to let the roughs make the first break he had no plan. Debolt was dead and Schutt in the jug, so the next move was Yocum's. Whatever Yocum started, the marshal would have to horn into, and that gave Yocum the edge because he could toll the marshal into a trap from which there'd probably be no out. Well, if trouble is certain, try and enjoy it, he told himself, lighting his cigar and heading for the jail.

There, in the open doorway of the dark office, he found Barney armed with an old Ballard .54, and Obermeyer with a 10-gauge scatter-gun loaded with buckshot. Patch and Melchoir, they said, were patrolling the street; and Frank Quinby—the carpenter who owned the lumber yard—was rounding up more right-minded men with guts and guns. Waldrum was closing his store directly and would be along with his two male helpers.

Standing there, listening to the ever-increasing stir, Jud considered the situation. At best he could probably muster no more than two dozen men. On the other hand, discounting the outsiders in town who were presumably just irresponsible cowboys bent on spilling some red paint, Yocum's sympathizers would likely number around two score.

Adding to the pervading restlessness the wind was rising, stirring the dust; and lightning and thunder added their bit. Jumpy as a cat on ice, Jud hitched at his belt and moved up the street. Then came the roar of a gun, followed by a moment of absolute silence, heavy as a dead bear.

JERKING his Colt free Jud ran toward The Tepee. A few spooked ponies had pulled away from the hitch-rails and were milling about, and men whose curiosity hadn't overpowered their good sense were stepping all over themselves getting away from whatever had taken place.

Shouldering through this ever-widening ring he gained a cleared space before the gunsmith's. Sprawled on the walk lay a man, and the white-coated barber was kneeling beside him. "It's Patch," the barber said. "Yocum shot him in the back. Melchoir's gone for the doctor."

Up till then Jud had been almost dispassionate about the whole business, but now a hot choking anger took him. "Damn them to hell," he said through his teeth as he turned again toward The Tepee.

At the entrance he was overhauled by Quinby. "I got eight men, Marshal," he panted, gesturing with his Winchester. "What shall we do?"

"Surround this dump and don't let one man out." Then he bulged in. Obviously he was expected. The women, the orchestra and gamblers were elsewhere. The thirsty side of the bar was lined with men facing the doorway. Getz was nearest. He fired. But, having jumped aside, Jud fired too. Getz spun and crumpled. Then lead began to fly free and easy, but Jud had dived behind the bar's end.

Almost before he'd hit the floor the lights had gone. Darkness had dropped like a smothering blanket, broken only by red flashes as bullets searched him out. One of the shot-down lamps had fallen ablaze. Up flared the sawdust on the floor. "Fire!" someone yelled as the odor of coal-oil spiked the smells of whisky and gunsmoke.

The rush for the doorway was met by lead from Quinby's recruits. Howling and

cursing the rush reeled back.

Running along at a low crouch behind the bar Jud collided with a cowering bartender, slugged hard with his gun-barrel and went on. By the light of the spreading flames he could see the stage and the dark doorway beside it. Driving toward it he fired at someone coming out.

A gun flamed there and something nicked his arm. Again he fired, ran forward and fell over a man on his hands and knees. With a groan the fellow flattened out and stayed down.

Hell was out for recess up front now, as the flames licked up the gambling layouts and along the tinder-dry walls. Yelling, coughing men—cut off from the rear and unable to shoot their way out the front doorway—were trapped.

But Jud had no time for that. A light still showed in Yocum's office. Rolling to his feet, he kicked aside the partly-open door and lunged in. Then he stopped.

With his gun still in his fist, Yocum lay sprawled across his desk. Leaning against the wall stood a man clutching a bloody gap in his chest. It was Koury.

"I got him for you, Conroy." Koury took a ragged breath. "Never liked him nohow, and come back to square my debt to you. Guess I set the joint afire—" As he slid to the floor his gun fell heavily.

Just then the back door was splintered from its hinges and Obermeyer spilled in. Leaping over the scrambling blacksmith, Barney and Melchoir swarmed into the office. "You'd best come along, son," Barney panted, yelling to be heard above the roar of the flames. "We let them fellers out the front and the scrap's over. This place is a-going fast. Come on!"

Yocum was dead. They left him. Koury was dead, too; but Jud dragged him out under the smoky sky. "How's Patch?" he asked as the first rain spattered down.

"He'll live," Melchoir said. "Now I reckon we can all settle down again."

"Me, I got to get somebody to settle down with," Jud grinned, heading for the eating-house.

WESTERN WASHINGS

WHEN the news hit the world that gold had been discovered in California, people came there from far and wide to make their fortunes. There was money to be made in business as well as in digging for the precious ore. And one of the best-paying businesses was that of washing clothes!

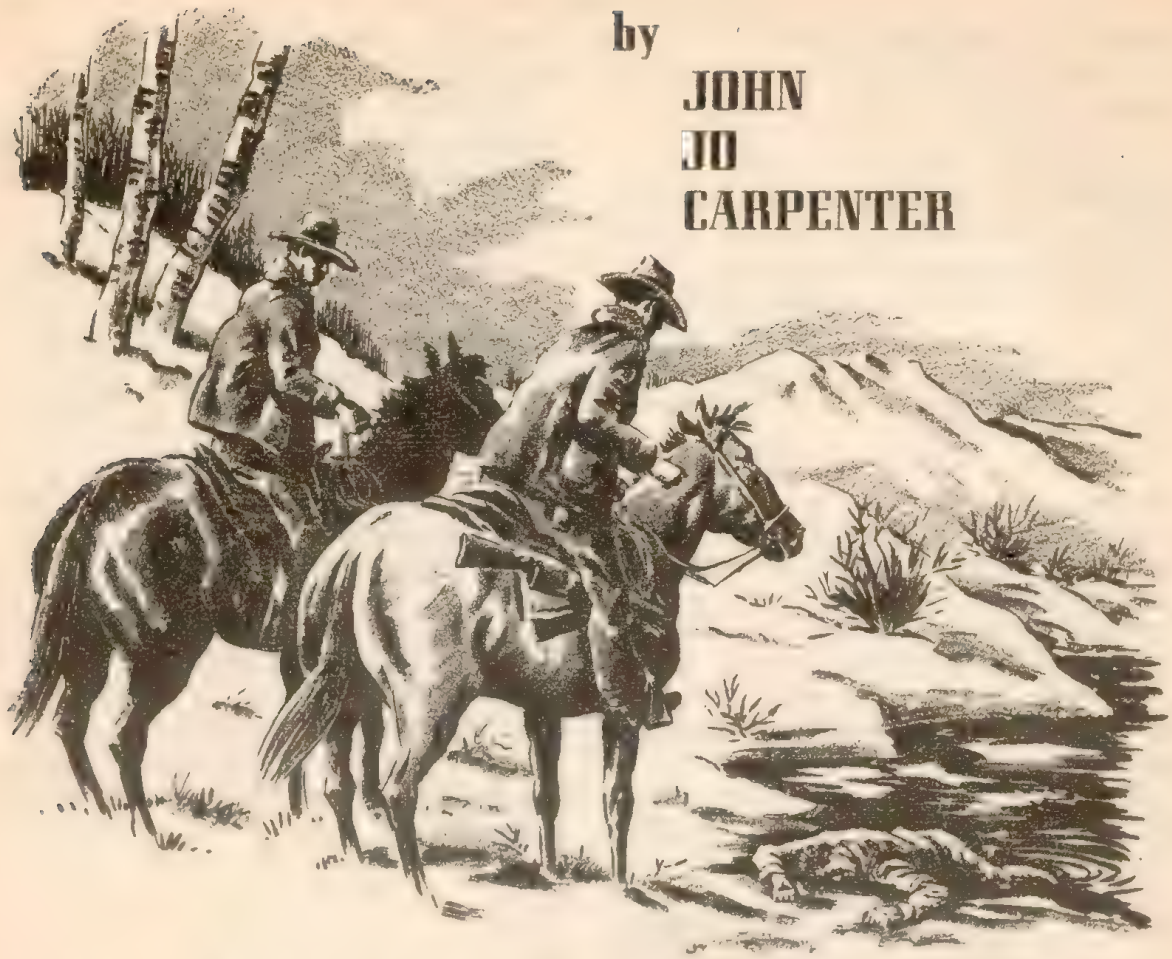
At first, women took care of this menial task and it was common to see Mexicans and Indians as washerwomen. The price they got was $8 a dozen pieces of clothing, and at that rate, as Bayard Taylor remarked, "It was very easy to earn double the wages of a Member of Congress."

Now and then a miner who couldn't hit the precious ore decided he had to live and get ready cash. So he turned "washerwoman," and it was an amusing sight to see a great burly, long-bearded fellow kneeling on the ground, with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and rubbing a shirt on a board. And he also did the starching and ironing.

But since there happened to be more dirty clothes than washerwomen, a solution had to be found. Fantastic as it seems, it is a matter of fact that dirty clothes were sent by boats to China and to the Sandwich Islands. The natives there who couldn't get to America at least made dough washing the miners' dirty clothes.

—Harold Gluck

by
JOHN
JO
CARPENTER



GO BACK with CLEAN HANDS

SAM GARDNER rode ahead, pushing his horse at a hard walk, leaning out of the saddle to read sign while daylight lasted. Lee Hale followed, grumbling as they splashed back and forth across the creek. Thin ice shattered under their horses at the edge of the stream.

"Man needs web feet for this," Lee complained, holding his feet out of the water as they forded. "Jack was drunk. Why would a sober man cross so often? It's a wild-goose chase."

"Maybe," said Sam, over his shoulder. "But a drunk man just lets his horse ramble, and no horse would cross for fun. I get the picture of Jack hangin' heavy first on one side of his horse, then the other. That'd turn a pony back and forth."

"There's a chance," Lee agreed, "that Jack got his, and all I say is he stretched

Under a cloud of suspicion, Sam Gardner had to go out and hunt the killer of the one man he hated!

his luck a long time."

The lowering December sun gave little warmth. Both men wore sheepskin coats. Both men wore guns, too, and Sam carried a short-barreled rifle in a boot on his saddle. Both men rode horses marked with Van Baxter's Figure 50 brand.

Lee was at least twelve years the elder of the two, being close to forty, but it would never have occurred to him to take the lead away from Sam Gardner. He had no personal interest in this, like Sam. Besides, he was by nature a follower.

"I'd bet four bits we find him goat-drunk in a snowbank some place," he called.

Sam reined in. "You'd lose that four bits. Look there."

"I'll be damned!"

They stared down at the body of the man. It lay with its legs in the water, its torso on the bank. Jack Endicott had fallen off in the middle of the stream, to judge by the icy sheen of his clothing. He had crawled this far before his strength gave out.

HE HAD taken off the dirty, ragged mackinaw he always wore in winter. He had pulled the shirt-tail out of his pants, so he could bandage the ugly wound in his right side. There was no blood—the cold waters of the creek had taken care of that. But no man could carry a wound that close to his middle and live.

"See if you can find his horse," Sam snapped. "It didn't go home so it must be snaggled somewhere."

"I feel a lot sorrier for the horse, if it was snaggled out all night and all day, than I do for Jack," Lee said, prodding his mount up the bank. "Somehow I ain't the sentimental type. When I don't like a guy alive, I don't suddenly think up reasons to miss him when he's dead."

He shoved his horse out of the trees that lined the creek and added, under his breath, "And neither are you, Sam Gardner! Now I only hope you've got gall enough to grab the widow, for her sake and yours both."

It bothered him, though. There was going to be talk about this. Sam Gardner was as straight a man as ever lived, but it was sure no secret that he had always been crazy about Marie Endicott. Four years since Marie married Jack, and there had been no other girl for Sam since that time.

Sam could have had girls aplenty, too. He had a little piece of property and a few cows. He had a good job with Van. Whenever Roy Cozart got ready to retire, all Sam had to do was announce himself and he was as good as elected sheriff. Sam was that kind of a man.

But talk was no respecter of character, and Lee wished someone else had found Jack Endicott's body.

He came back leading Jack's showy, worthless black stallion. The horse was typical of Jack. It was a first-glance champion.

"Found him with his bridle hooked in a limb, sure-enough. Wonder what Marie can get for him now? She'd better sell him to an Indian."

"Shut up and help me tie him on," Sam snarled.

He had dragged Jack's body up to level ground. His face was gray, but it wasn't the late Mr. Endicott that caused him suffering. They tied the body on the black horse and set out at a walk toward the road into town.

Reaching it, Sam pulled up and handed the black horse's reins to Lee.

"You mosey on into town," he said. "Tell Roy I'll stop and see him right away. I'll go tell Marie about it."

Lee reached over and seized Sam's wrist.

"Don't you do that, now!" he pleaded. "Come on in with me. Let Roy send his missus out to break the news to Marie. There's going to be enough—all right, all right! Have it your own way."

Sam's thin face had blackened with anger. He was not a handsome man, but usually he wasn't thought ugly. He had an ugly look now.

"I found him," Sam said. "I'll break it to Marie myself. And son—"

"All right, Sam—I said all right! I'll

meet you at the courthouse."

"In about an hour."

Sam turned his horse and kicked it down the road in the other direction. In a few miles he turned down a side-road, little more than a pair of trails an axle-length apart.

This had been old Jud Shepherd's place, and for a while it had been a familiar place to Sam. He was new to this country then. New also was his ambition to quit roving and lay up a few dimes and try to amount to something.

Marie Shepherd had flirted with a lot of them. She was small and fair and pretty, and she knew it. But you're only seventeen once, and the flower that blooms today forever fades.

She married Jack Endicott instead of Sam Gardner. Sam hung around because he had a good job at the Figure 50, and saving money had become a kind of a habit. He knew there was talk when he dropped in to see her now and then.

He had to balance that talk against the real need she was in sometimes. Jack didn't even see to it that she had wood for the stove or didies for the kids. He called himself a horse-broker, which was an excuse for paying seven dollars a month he couldn't afford for office space and yardage in town.

SAM used to drop in now and then, to see if she had wood for the fire, or needed anything for the kids. Anybody could have watched or listened in. Jud Shepherd was dead, and thanks to Jack Endicott, Marie had few enough friends now.

The kids were both girls. There would be a third one before long. The shine had gone from Marie's yellow hair and there was no more coquettish self-confidence in the pansy eyes that looked too big for her face.

But Sam Gardner was not aware that any change had taken place in her. He was that kind of a man. When she opened the door, holding up a lamp to see who it was, his heart pounded in the old way.

"Kids asleep?" he whispered. She nodded and he went on, soft-voiced, "Come out here, Marie. I want to talk to you."

"No, come in by the stove."

She knew how he avoided being alone with her, for her own sake, but she insisted. He came in hesitantly. There were only three rooms to this little house. The two little girls, a year and a half apart in age, were in a bed in the corner of this room.

Marie set the lamp down on the table and looked at him. When she saw his face in full light, she knew at once. Her thin hands went to her throat and fumbled with the collar of her faded dress.

"Jack's dead," she choked.

He took her by the shoulders.

"That's right. Somebody shot him in the back, seems like, as he left town last night. Lee and me found him in the creek. Lee took the body on into town. Take it easy, now."

She pushed his hands away. "I'll take it easy," she said. "I'll take it easy for the first time in my life. Why should I try to lie to you, Sam? I'm glad he's dead, for the kids' sake. I hoped he would die! I didn't want them to grow up and know—"

"Marie, don't say that!"

"I'll say what I please!" One of the children stirred, and she lowered her voice. "Maybe I am sorry, in a way."

"What'll you do now?"

"Let Baxter have the place. He offered me fifty-five hundred just yesterday." At Sam's exclamation of surprise she went on, "He has been pretty kind to us. Everybody's kind, except—"

"Oh. Oh, I see!" Sam took her hand, and that was all there had ever been between them since her marriage. "Well, Marie, I'll go see if Elly Cozart won't come out and stay with you."

"It's not necessary. I can manage. I always have, haven't I?"

He headed back to town, chewing over the puzzle of what Van Baxter wanted with Jud Shepherd's old place. Just before he died, Jud had tried to sell it to Van—for three thousand dollars.

Now Van was offering Marie fifty-five

hundred. It didn't make sense, unless Van had a lot of pity in his heart. Say, about twenty-five hundred dollars' worth.

Or unless Van, too, could remember Marie as she had been before life with Jack Endicott had robbed her of her sapling-like youth and vitality.

Well, that would be the best thing that could happen to her . . . As mistress of the Figure 50, she'd bloom again. Those kids, for whom she had stood all a woman could stand, would have a chance. Yet pain went through him like a sharp knife, to think of losing her to a second man.

A light gleamed in the sheriff's office in the old frame courthouse at the end of the street, but Sam did not quite feel like facing Roy Cozart yet.

He tied and went into the Buffalo Head saloon. Van Baxter was at a corner table with a bottle and a deck of cards, playing solitaire. Sam called for a drink and went to his table.

"I thought you were at home, Van," Sam said.

"I thought you were up on the Walton fence," Van said, without looking up.

"I was, but I heard Jack Endicott had disappeared so Lee and me come down to see if we could find him." Still Van said nothing. The barkeep brought Sam his drink. Sam picked it up and went on, "We found him, all right. Dead. Shot in the right side, from behind. He made it almost home before he fell in the creek and drowned."

VAN laid down his cards. He was a big man, two years older than Sam and looking even younger. He had run the Figure 50 only a few years, inheriting it from his father. The elder Baxter was one of the historic figures of this part of the country.

"Well now!" Van said, in a troubled tone of voice. "Well, now, that's too bad."

"Not for him, but for his family," Sam said wearily. "I told Marie already. It was a mean job."

"You—you was out there to see her just now?"

"Yes." Sam told him briefly how it had been. "I've got to go down and see Roy about it now."

"Why? I thought you worked for the Figure Fifty. I thought it was the Figure Fifty that paid you your keep and pay."

"Yes, but—"

Van bunched the cards irritably. "Hasn't there been enough talk about you and that woman? It reflects on me. You better—"

Sam's hand shot out and clutched Baxter's shoulder, and Van came out of his chair with a foul exclamation and tried to throw off the hand. Sam held on, gritting his teeth to bite back the sudden flood of rage.

Baxter's shirt tore across the shoulder, and the sound seemed to enrage him. He chopped out with both fists, and Sam went backward as Van's right grazed his jaw.

He did not exactly lose consciousness, but the next thing he knew he was sitting on the floor, and Van was standing over him rubbing his right arm with his left hand. Feeling his muscle, in the way a man will when he itches to use it again.

"Now get out to the Walton fence camp and stay there!" Van said harshly. "I'm not supportin' any more romancers and the Figure Fifty ain't a winter resort. And don't ever lay hands on me again, boy. No tramp puncher ever did do that."

Sam stood up and said, "Fix your own fence, Van. I've got to go see Roy Cozart."

He headed for the door. Van came swiftly around in front of him.

"Not on my horse, you don't!" he said. "Peel off your saddle and hoof it. I've took all I intend to take from you. I should have run you off a long time ago."

Surprise held Sam rooted to the spot a moment. Since when had Van felt this way about things? Van had always leaned on him, used him for a foreman whenever the Figure 50 had need of one. Sam drew seven dollars a month bonus pay. What itched the big fool, anyway.

"You talk like a damn child, Van," he said shortly. "You had luck. Don't push it too far. Now, get out of my way."

"No man of mine—" Van yelled.

Sam took a step toward the door, and as Van sidled in front of him again, Sam lashed out with his left. Van outweighed him, but he knew the big man was awkward and slow on his feet.

He did not try hard. He sent his left low, doubling Van over his own fists. He hooked a right to the temple. Van reeled and sloped forward to close.

Sam backed and circled, jabbing without trying to land one, until he was between Van and the door. Still he did not hit, until Van followed him through the door.

"You're a hog for it, I reckon," Sam said.

He picked his spot and planted one under Van's ear, and the big man toppled to his knees and staggered to his feet again, his long arms still groping. Sam walked in between them and lifted a sharp uppercut, and then put out both of his hands to lower Van gently to the floor of the porch.

"He'll keep," he told the barkeep. "A little rest will do him good. What got into him?"

THE saloon man gave Sam a quick glance.

"Don't you know?" said the bartender.

"I sure don't. Me and him never had no trouble. He's a fool, but then lots of smart, hard men have fools for sons—especially when they're only sons. Puzzles me, he'd get so pure in heart all of a sudden."

"Van ain't pure in heart."

"When he wakes up, tell him I'll leave his cayuse in his own damn corral. Got a horse of my own out there to ride away from here on. It's like old times, to quit a job thisaway."

"Watch yourself, Sam," the barkeep said cryptically. "He's not hearin' anything now so I can speak freely—and later on I'll deny it. But watch yourself! Van ain't so pure in heart."

Sam shrugged. The barkeep seemed about ready to explain what he meant. Then Van stirred, and he changed his mind. After all, the Figure 50 was a powerful outfit, and a man who worked for thirty a month behind another man's bar couldn't afford enemies like the 50's owner.

Sam eased up into the saddle and dawdled down to the courthouse. Lee Hale's horse was tied in front. He racked his own beside it and went in.

Cozart's office was in the basement, a single littered room with thick stone walls. Behind it was the best and most comfortable jail west of the Mississippi — two stone-walled cells that were cool in the summer, warm in winter, and usually empty.

Roy had been a tall man in his youth, but he had gradually bent under the years. He still had power in his shoulders and there was nothing senile or childish in his cold blue eyes. He took his feet down off the desk when Sam entered.

"You took your time, kid. How'd she stand it?"

"Middlin'. What did you do with the body?"

"To the undertakers. You went through the pockets, Lee tells me."

"Nothin' there. But that ain't surprising, is it? When did he ever have anything in his pockets?"

"Then you don't think it was robbery, Sam?"

Sam laughed. "Who the hell would bother to rob Jack? More likely he'd try to rob somebody else."

"Who, for instance?"

"Anybody. I don't mean I think that's what happened, Roy—" Suddenly he cocked his head, thinking. "Could be, at that," he went on slowly. "Jack didn't have much nerve but if he was hard up for cash—"

The old sheriff shook his head, and Lee blurted, "That ain't Roy's idea, Sam. He thinks it was over something else."

"For instance?"

"Wel-l-ll, Marie."

"Marie?"

"What else did he have that was worth a dime?" the sheriff asked. "There's a sayin' that murder—premeditated, that is—is committed for only three reasons. This was premeditated, I'd say, since he was shot in the back and allowed to

wander off with the wound in him."

"I've heard all this, Sam," Lee put in, and for some reason Sam got the idea Lee was trying to warn him. "Me and Roy have been tryin' to cipher it out together."

"First there's money," said Roy. "Jack never had any so we can rule that out. He lost a dollar and thirty-five cents playin' poker night before last, and that cleaned him. Next is revenge, and if you wanted revenge on Jack Endicott, all you'd have to do was catch him some place and kick him in the teeth. No, I can't picture anybody wantin' revenge on a crawlin' worm.

"That leaves — women. Maybe somebody wanted his wife and couldn't get her no other way. There's been a lot of talk—"

"I don't ever want to hear that expression again," Sam cut in.

SHERIFF COZART put his big foot back up on the desk and studied Sam boldly. They had always gotten along, these two, and yet Sam sensed a hostility in the old man — a male-dog, unspoken kind of quarrelsomeness.

He stood there thinking, trying to get it straight in his mind. The fight with Van, losing a job he liked and having to switch his plans suddenly, had upset him.

"Speakin' of talk," he said, "for Marie's sake, I'd like to find who done it."

"So would I."

"I wouldn't want this to go further, but there's bound to be gossip, especially since I'll probably leave the country. Before I go, I'd like to see whoever killed Jack brought in, Roy."

"You're leavin' the country?" Lee said, in surprise.

"Yeah. I just had a row with Van. No damn reason for it, but he tried to ride me and I wasn't in no mood to be rode."

Lee and Roy exchanged quick, uneasy glances. Sam said, "The way it looked to me, somebody come up behind Jack about two mile out of town — at least he was ridin' straight enough up to that point.

"The road runs right along the creek there. He could have been potshot from behind any place. It looks to me like somebody let him have it there. He was hit bad, you know, and probably he fell down over his horse. Maybe the fella thought he was dead.

"Anyway the trail was up and down that bank, back and forth across that creek, all the rest of the way, Roy—like he was tryin' to hang on long enough to get home. Like he was awake, so he knowed what he was doing, but not much more.

"I cipher it that he'd slop over first to one side, and the horse would turn thataway, and then to the other after he felt himself slippin', and the horse would turn back. That black stud he rode ain't got much sense."

"That'd be about three miles he rode, after he was hit," the sheriff said.

"In a bee-line. Half again that, zigzaggin' the way he did."

"That'd make him shot pretty early in the evenin'. He left town before dark."

"Early enough so there'd be light to shoot by. That black stud was a fool about lettin' anybody come close to him from behind. Didn't anybody just walk up and shove a gun against Jack and shoot him."

"Premeditated," the sheriff worried, nodding. "I guess you can account for your time?"

Sam had known this would come up some time—that the naked question must be asked and answered nakedly. Yet it scalded him with something that felt like shame, to have to answer it.

"I was kipped out up at the Walton line fence. Lee can prove that! Van sent us up there day before yesterday—and why the hell we have to start checkin' a brand-new fence before there's been wind or snow against it is just one of the fool things I don't understand."

"Who's going to prove where Lee was?" Cozart stood up and put out his hand. "You better give me your gun, Sam. People are going to think it's mighty funny if you go around armed that way."

Sam backed toward the door, holding the gun in its holster.

"What do you mean, give you my gun?" he said stridently. "You gone crazy?"

"Give it here, now," said the sheriff. "There's been a lot of talk—"

Sam stepped backward into the doorway, snarling, "And most of it right here in the sheriff's office. Is that all you're going to do—gab? Don't tell me you want my gun, Roy, unless you're ready to haul off and say I did it."

"No. No, I ain't ready to say that."

REACHING out, Sam pulled the door shut and faded back to his horse. When he heard the door open again, he kept the horse between him and it, surprised that Roy would try to follow him.

But it was Lee Hale, not the sheriff. Lee came to him quickly.

"We better get out of here, Sam," he said. "Roy's right. There's been too dadgummed much talk, and like he says the burden of proof is a-goin' to be on us, as far as gossip is concerned. I'm your alibi and you're mine, and that puts us right square in the middle. And you didn't help it none with that fool fight with Van."

"You wasn't concerned in that."

"Ah, hell, now! You know me, Sam. Do I have to go back and punch Van in the nose myself? I'll tag along with you."

They stepped up into their saddles and turned their horses, and headed toward town. A big horse came out of the yawning livery stable door, fighting the bit. A big man was on him, trying to handle him with one hand.

"Van, and he's got a quart of painkiller under his left wing, or I don't know the shape of a brown bottle!" Lee mused. "There ain't no snakes this season of year."

Baxter got the big horse under control and lined out for home, the cylindrical package under his arm.

"Roy, he don't miss much," Lee went on. "Me and him just set there and talked it over."

Sam pulled in and snapped his fingers. "I meant to ask him to send his wife out to see Marie—"

"I mentioned that. He said he reckoned he'd wait and see who else went out there."

"The old fool!"

"He ain't such a fool," Lee said uneasily. "He thought from the first that it was over Marie. Sam, he didn't even rule you out! He said Marie was a fine girl and had a hell of a time of it, and no telling what a feller would do if he thought it was the only way out for her.

"But I don't think he thinks it's you. He said you'd prob'ly catch Jack in front of a lot of people and call his hand over some crooked, fool stunt Jack pulled, and execute him for that. So would just about anybody else he knows, in the same position.

"Said you've got to take into consideration who is the kind of person to shoot Jack in the back. Who has got the most to lose by hauling off and calling his hand in public? Who is the man with the biggest yellow streak in town?"

"You can't go around measurin' up yellow streaks," Sam said.

"Roy will. He said whoever done it, if he was a local feller, would set around and chaw his fingernails until the body was found. When you shoot a man in the back—well, that's a hard habit to get into, Sam. He asked who was in town that wouldn't ordinarily be in town, and I said nobody I had seen, except maybe Van Baxter. And of course Van—"

Sam pulled in his horse and snarled, "Van! No. No, he wouldn't shoot a man in the back. No, that's loco!"

"I wonder," came Lee's uneasy voice from the dark, "if that wasn't what Roy was thinkin' about? Have you ever heard talk about Van and Marie? Neither have I. *But maybe he has!* If there was such talk, who would be the last person it would get to? *You!* I just can't picture anybody takin' his life into his hands to bring you gossip about Marie and your boss. If Roy—"

"Shut up," Sam said. "Shut up, and let me think!"

VAN was a funny one. He didn't measure up to his dad and everyone knew it, and so did Van. He had an odd, touchy pride. Not a bad man to work for, but you had to know him, you had to

keep an eye out for his tender places.

Paid good wages, too—but then he liked to have it known that he could afford things like that. He hadn't been one of those who rode over to Jud Shepherd's place, when Marie was single. No, he had a girl up at the Capitol then—a daughter of the State Auditor.

She threw him over at the last minute. Why? What did she know about a big, rich, good-looking youngster that would make him a bad husband?

There hadn't been any talk at the time, but Van took it hard. It smarted. He seemed afraid of girls for a long time after that—afraid he'd let himself in for another blow at his pride. He went with one or two girls after a couple of years, but nothing ever came of it.

But then, Marie was married to Jack Endicott, and Sam Gardner was one of the Figure 50's old hands, and people had stopped talking about how Van Baxter didn't square up with the shadow of his old man.

First he didn't want Marie's property, for three thousand dollars. Then he wanted it badly enough to offer almost twice that. Sam pounded his temple with his fist, trying to remember Marie's exact words.

Somehow they left him with the impression that Van might have been around there several times to talk with her about it. If so, he was all-fired cautious about it. He certainly kept it to himself.

Why hadn't Marie taken him up on the offer? It was more than the property was worth. Maybe there were strings to the offer. Maybe she knew it wasn't an arm's-length deal. Maybe it was one she couldn't take, even for her kids' sake, because she knew some other kind of a deal went with it. . . .

What had the barkeep been trying to tell him? Why had Van lurked in town, and why must he now take a quart of whisky home with him, Jack Endicott's body having been discovered?

What did Roy Cozart mean by asking who had the most to lose by calling Jack Endicott out and killing him publicly? A raggedy-pants tramp rider could ride on with a clear conscience after a fair, stand-up fight that could be listed as self-defense.

Who would have to stay around and answer the unspoken questions behind such a fight? Who lacked the nerve, the moral courage, to come right out and say he felt sorry for Jack's wife? Whose motives would be subjected to the acid examination of gossip—for years and years and years?

Because it was that kind of a town, that kind of a neighborhood. People would talk! They had talked about Sam and Marie, because of the way Sam behaved after Marie married Jack. It was pretty plain to everyone that he didn't want any other woman if he couldn't have Marie.

Nothing could stop them from talking—but, Sam realized suddenly, it wasn't all malicious, this gossip. It hit pretty close to the truth! After all, the talk merely said that he was still hopelessly, shamelessly in love with another man's wife.

Well, wasn't it true? He was! Did that make him some kind of a skunk, a murderer? He wasn't afraid to answer their questions or face their damn talk.

Then who was?

He turned his horse so suddenly that Lee, riding behind, almost piled into him. He threw the reins up to Lee, in front of the courthouse, and went inside.

Roy Cozart heard him clumping down the basement steps but he did not bother to get up. He merely took his feet off the desk and leaned forward in his creaking old swivel chair, and made sure there was nothing to keep him from getting to his feet in a hurry.

"I guess maybe you think it was Van that killed Jack," Sam said.

ROY toyed with some papers on his desk. "It's a possibility," Roy said. "I want to kind of ask around and see if maybe he could have. Two or three others I'd like to check up on, too."

"He'll do for me," Sam said, finding it hard to keep the quiver out of his voice. "What made you think of him?"

"He was so damned jealous of you. And why did he send you and Lee up to the Walton fence, anyway? Everybody knows that fence is in good shape. Was he afraid to have you around? Did he want you in bad shape for an alibi, with only your best friend's word, which maybe was true and maybe was just because he was your friend? I been in this business a long time—"

"I'll find out," Sam said. "He headed for home with a bottle of liquor. Van can't drink. I'll get it out of him."

The sheriff reached in his desk drawer and brought out a worn deputy's badge. It wasn't a rowdy county; ordinarily he ran the office without help, except in the fall when sales brought in big crowds.

"Put this on you," he said. "I'll swear you in as a deputy. I don't want another murder on my hands. I want him brought in legal."

"I don't need no star for what I want to do," Sam said. "If he didn't, I don't want him. If he did—"

Suddenly the old sheriff's foot came up. It caught Sam under the kneecap. He doubled forward, and the sheriff's hand shot out and neatly lifted Sam's gun out of its holster. When Sam straightened, he was looking down the muzzle of his own weapon. The sheriff jogged it towards the cells at the rear.

"Go on back in there and stay where you won't get into trouble, until I see how Van figures in this," he said coldly.

"Cut it out, Roy. You know I ain't going to go in there," Sam said.

"And you know I'll shoot if you don't."

"There ain't no law—" Sam began.

"I don't need a law," the sheriff snarled. "You don't need a badge so I don't need a law. Either you go out there with clean hands or you don't go at all. Now get back—"

"Give me the damn badge," Sam said.

He raised his hand, and Roy took time swearing him in. Halfway through the oath, Lee Hale came in, and Roy handed him another badge and swore him in, too. He closed the desk drawer.

"All the badges I got, boys. I wish I had two or three more deputies. I knowed Van's daddy. Him and me whipped this country between us. Van's a spoiled, cowardly brat, but that don't mean—I mean I still ain't sure—"

"I am," said Lee; and Sam felt better, because when Lee took the trouble to think things out, he was generally right.

"But I don't like this," Lee went on, in a troubled voice. "The one thing Van couldn't stand would be to be dragged in here, into his pa's own town, and tried for murder. I think he'd a sight rather be dead—especially if he could take somebody with him—somebody he was jealous of anyway."

The sheriff shook his head and said, "Boys, these is your orders—bring him in if you can. Put him under arrest and warn him anything he says may be used against him. Just tell him I want to ask him some questions, personal.

"But don't take no chances! I—I—boys, I knowed his daddy. I guess Van ain't the only man in town afraid to face things. I—I—I just couldn't go up against the son of a man that—that—"

"You're an old fool," Sam said roughly. "All you're fit for is to serve dispossess papers and seize widows' properties." And old Roy grinned ruefully, as though he and Sam understood each other.

"He's right sure in his own mind," Lee said, as they headed out of town. "I reckon he has been, all along. I guess he figured that with all the talk there was goin' around, all he had to do was let nature take its—"

LEE grunted, and back of him a hollow booming noise thundered and echoed up and down the creek channel. Lee sagged forward in the saddle, and Sam jerked his sheepskin coat open, ripping off the buttons in his haste to get at his gun.

Lee reeled in the saddle. Sam grabbed Lee's bridle and held it and said, in a low voice, "Get down, get down! Fall easy and I'll lead the horse out of the way so he don't walk on you. Are you hit bad?"

"Too low to scare me, but it hurts like hell," Lee whimpered, rolling from the

saddle. "In the side, like, but not as close to the middle as Jack got it. Right here's where he got Jack, too, ain't it?"

Sam let go of the horse and it went galloping away across the snow. He slid out of his saddle, taking the rifle with him, and walked toward the creek.

Darkness had long since fallen, but he knew he made a blot against the snow that was good enough to shoot at. He kept the rifle in his left hand, waiting for the second shot to come.

It came, and he felt his left leg buckle under him. He did not try to keep to his feet, with that red-hot agony in his flesh. He sat down hard and snapped a rifle shot at the gun-flash that showed over the creek bank. Back of him, Lee shouted a warning, in a voice that was too strong for a man hit vitally.

"He's headin' down the creek downstream, Sam! He's got his horse tied yonder, see? Get the horse, get the horse!"

Sam rolled over on his stomach and took careful aim. He fired, and the big horse grunted and went down threshing, and he felt something dig into the skin of his breast. It was the deputy's badge, and it reminded him of his obligations.

"Get your hands up and come out with them in plain sight." he called. "You're under arrest. I've been sworn in as a deputy, Van, and Roy said bring you in for questioning. If you—"

Van blazed away again, and Sam dropped the rifle and twisted over on his left side and lifted out his .45. He fired twice and heard Van scream and cough.

He inched forward on his stomach as the whimpering stopped. Van came up out of the creek, staggering as he ran, his gun in his hand.

Sam saw Van's slug pound into the ground between them and knew that Van no longer knew what he was doing. But there was a lot of bull vitality in him, and he kept plunging on until Sam lifted the .45 and put two more into him.

The two thumb-thick slugs knocked Van down. He fell on his face and did not move. Sam sat up, feeling sick, and felt of his wound. It was ugly, and bleeding hard, but no bones were broken.

"Did he get you bad, Sam?" came Lee's pleading voice.

"No," said Sam, thinking of Marie, thinking how another year or two of waiting might let him repay her for all those bleak years with Jack Endicott. "No, he didn't do me no real harm, Lee," he said.

LEADVILLE GLEANINGS

THERE were few accommodations in Leadville in 1878. A huge building was erected that was provided with three tiers of bunks with gay colored calico curtains, where one thousand men could sleep. The owner of this "hotel" could charge the men one dollar apiece a night and thus make himself one thousand dollars an evening.

"Broken Nose Scotty" was put in jail in Leadville in 1879. A man called on him while he was in the clink to ask what he would take for a mining claim he owned. Scotty set the price at $30,000. This being okay, he went to an attorney's office to sign the papers. But Scotty needed money to pay his fine and this was advanced to him. Then he returned to the jail and paid the fines of the men who were imprisoned with him, took them into Leadville and bought each man a new outfit and ordered a big dinner for them. But by night, every last man was back in jail!

—Edna Stewart

"Maybe our whisky ain't good enough for you—"

Gunfighter's Choice

By FRED GROVE

SOMETIMES the solitary feeling pushed a man hard, drove him against his better judgment. Jeff Cole's excuse to himself was the need of a drink. But jogging into Spur he knew that his real hunger was for company, the drawling, friendly talk of men. He wanted to ride leisurely along Main Street, with his head up, without that cold twinge at the base of his spine.

Tying up in front of the Texas House, he noticed heads turning. How long, he thought soberly, before the word fanned through town that the owlhoot, Jeff Cole, was back? He looked up as two punchers jangled into the saloon. They were a slim, thin-faced boy with a slight swagger to his high-heeled walk, and an older, chunky rider. Too young to remember, Jeff figured, glancing along the grit-whipped street.

It almost gave him a start to see the spare, loose-jointed shape of Jim Banning, the town marshal, prowling the board walk again. Jeff tabbed him for a talk later and stepped inside. With some-

To Run Away, or to Kill—that Was Jeff Cole's Problem!

thing like hunger he breathed in the damp, stale smell. The light was shadowed and he blinked.

There was a card game slapping in the back corner and the two punchers stood slouched against the bar. Jeff read them at a glance—well heeled, two guns apiece swung low—and he felt a vague caution. You could spot them like bulls in a heifer pen. He went to the bar and called for whisky. When the bottle was brought him, he poured a drink. He eyed it morosely, feeling his depression.

Catching his reflection in the huge back mirror that ran the bar's length, he stared in critical appraisal. He had been a youth when he'd fled to Mexico, chased by a posse, following that shooting scrape. Now he saw a gaunt man, wind-burned, the eye corners squint-lined in the square, leather-brown face. At thirty-four Jeff Cole was showing the strain of traveling the lonesome places, sleeping in thin blankets, eating like a coyote.

Jaw tight, Jeff looked away. He was making idle circles on the polished wood with the bottom of his glass when he heard the barkeep's low mutter. When Jeff glanced up, the man was staring, recognition in the mild, hound-brown eyes. He was squatty and bald, with a friendly, fat-rolled face. Jeff's mind clicked, searching for a name—Bill Higgins. The years had broadened him, but Jeff remembered.

"You—" Higgins' voice was wondering. "Jeff, you're back!"

FROWNING, Jeff nodded and he knew that the punchers had heard by the way they jerked.

"No need to spread it around," Jeff said. "I don't want any more trouble. Everybody will hear soon enough."

"Why, you bet, Jeff. Sure . . ." Abruptly, the fat man was wiping the spotless bar with nervous motions, his round face white, strained. "Glad to see you . . . If you need anything . . . You did me a good turn once. Let me see—been about eleven years, I guess."

You just did me a poor turn, Jeff thought bleakly, speakin' out. It had been longer than eleven years. More like ten lifetimes.

The drink had gone bitter and Jeff realized that he should have known better. People didn't forget. Despite the passage of time, you still carried the stamp, and riding in here was asking for it. But he knew that he couldn't put it off forever, this coming back to Spur to start over again where it had all started. He had shot his first gun-fanner here. A blustering, wild-eyed badman just come up the Goodnight Trail looking for trouble, and Jeff hadn't backed down.

He guessed now that had been his trouble all along, the stubbornness, the stiff pride. But he had left more than a clean name behind him. Delia and Cathy lived here. Taking a step, Jeff wondered what they looked like.

"Hey, you!"

Startled, Jeff wheeled as he caught the challenging tone. It hit him that this was the start of the hard, brittle pattern again. You moved to new country, worked till somebody raked up the owlhoot past. Or till some gun-happy hand crawled you. Then you shot a man and rode off. Jeff Cole wasn't a wanted man any more, but as a gunfighter he might as well have been. It was the name. The one-notch boys—such as the slim kid and his blocky partner sliding along the bar now, yearned to add his name to their list and bolster their reps.

"Have a drink?" It was the younger rider talking.

Jeff looked them over. There was a reckless glitter in the kid's clear blue eyes. But the other one was the dangerous man. His head was too small for the thick shoulders, Jeff noticed through long habit, and the narrow-spaced eyes were red and bleary in a flat-nosed face.

"Much obliged," Jeff said tonelessly. "But I've had mine." He was turning when the broad-chested man flanking the kid muttered darkly and Jeff froze. He had the closed-in feeling of trying to avoid trouble, of failing miserably. The big fellow was weaving, teetering on his boot heels.

"We heard," he grunted in a thick tone. "Maybe our whisky ain't good enough for you."

From the rim of his eye, Jeff caught Higgins' frantic arm-waving meant for the punchers. "Thanks, Bill," Jeff said coldly, "but that Kansas City mirror won't get busted by me. I wouldn't waste the lead on these peckerwoods." His half-emptied whisky glass was still on the bar and he gripped it. For an instant he held it, staring and reluctant.

He took a deep breath. Then with a sweeping swing of his arm, he threw the whisky at the beefy, challenging face of the rider. There was a flat splat. Flustered, the man pawed at his mouth. Now he lunged forward with both arms raised, but Jeff hit him before he got them fully up. He smashed the long jaw with a short hook that made a sodden *thunk* in the room. As the thick face tilted back, Jeff drove a fist above the wide gunbelt. His man doubled up, calling harshly to the kid.

"Get him! Get him!"

There was murder in the hoarse voice and Jeff swung around. "Don't move," he snapped.

THE boy hesitated, eyes traveling from his downed partner back to Jeff.

"Go on—make him draw!"

The shoot out was coming, Jeff sensed, and in an instant it came to him with a shock that his gamble had failed. Instead of sidetracking trouble, his fists had only touched off the inevitable gunplay. He saw the blue eyes widen, the young mouth compressing with a reckless purpose, a fighter's pride in his irons. Then the kid's glance lifted and Jeff heard boots pounding behind him.

"Break it up!"

Risking a cautious glance, Jeff saw Jim Banning stride to a spraddle-legged halt. Wrinkled hands hung on his gunbelt, thumbs hooked over the brass-topped cartridges. Jeff saw recognition flare in the faded, smoky-gray eyes.

"You stir things up quick, Jeff," he said critically.

"He didn't start it." It was Higgins' outraged voice breaking in. "Ed Blanchard tried to bulldoze Jeff into drinking with him."

Loose, deliberate, Banning sauntered forward. "Never mind who," he drawled, slanting his head toward the street. "You Blanchard boys clear out. Jeff, you better come along." He looked at the kid gunman, a question in his eyes. "Dave, you're bitin' off a big chunk. This man's quick—out of your class in a shootin' match."

Dave Blanchard's face flamed and his slender body grew rigid. Behind him, Jeff saw Ed Blanchard on his feet, rubbing his jaw.

"Owlhooters ain't so tough," young Blanchard growled recklessly, and he wheeled, facing Jeff. "Next time you better come loaded."

Jeff shrugged, watching the pair start out at a reluctant walk. Banning turned and Jeff followed. Outside, he saw the Blanchards mount and ride off at a hard lope.

"They'd like to be tough," Banning shook his head regretfully. "Now, Dave, there, is kind of like you were once. Not mean, but Ed eggs him on and he won't back down. I guess pride's filled half of Boot Hill."

Down the street a woman walked from a store. She turned this way with a swinging step, a bundle under her arm. Something about her caught Jeff's eye. Something balled up tight inside him, an odd panic. It was Delia, a matured woman now, but still slim and dark and not showing the years. Distantly, he heard Banning's apologetic murmur, "See you later." Banning crossed to the other side of the street.

Jeff walked to meet her. He fumbled with his brush-beaten, brim-flopped hat, feeling the awkward silence. He searched her face. For a second he saw a faint expression there that he couldn't define. Slowly, a firm graveness slid across her features. The cool gray eyes and the set of the full mouth told him there was noth-

ing there for him.

"I heard you were back." She spoke in a low, matter-of-fact way that sobered him, chilled him. For he'd had his dim, unreasoning hopes. "You look worn out, almost ragged."

Her straight glance was on the torn shirt pocket, censoring him for his unkempt, drifter-marked appearance. Her fingers strayed almost to the pocket, hesitated and fell away.

"It's been a long time," he managed to say.

"They vindicated you in regard to that killing," she said severely, "but you didn't come back." Her eyes condemned him, the soft lines of her face unforgiving, hard. "You didn't have to stay away."

"Too late—a man who's been on the dodge, with a gunfighter's name, is dragging you down . . ." He was stumbling for words with the realization that their talk was circling, getting nowhere. "I don't blame you," he said in a half-swallowed bitterness. "I had nothing to offer. I sent what money I could."

SHE seemed to shrink back and Jeff, knowing that he had said the wrong thing, saw the pent-up resentment, the livid hurt like the lash of a quirt. She took a step to move past him. But as he drew aside, her head came up stubbornly. She gave him a long raking glance, and then her slim shoulders dropped.

"I—I wasn't going to tell you." She was looking away from him deliberately. "You don't deserve to know, and I won't tell her you're here. But Cathy is getting married soon." Delia paused and Jeff noticed the fine tracery of worry in the wide-spaced eyes. "You don't know the young man. He's wild, but a good boy."

Her voice was more of a hope, a determined apology, as she stepped away. He was staring after her, awkwardly gripping the grimy hat, fighting a growing realization. It cut into him like a knife that she didn't want him here. Not that he had expected more, yet it hurt and twisted him, deep down. But he hadn't told her what was really in his mind—that he had come back to start over again. Another thought, smarting to his pride, was how Delia had managed for them. For he knew that his letters with money, sent when he had it, hadn't provided enough. He was still watching Delia when she turned in at a high-fronted building. Then he saw the lettering on the window: DELIA COLE'S DRESS SHOP.

His boots beat a slow, booming echo on the walk as he went, slow-footed, to his gelding. He climbed into the saddle, rode to the feed barn, came back up the street and registered at the hotel. In his room, when he had washed and shaved, he felt some of the bone-weariness leave. There wasn't another shirt in his blanket roll, so he shrugged into the old one again, remembering Delia's critical eyes. It rolled through him somberly that the torn pocket pretty well showed what he was: a man too hard and gone too long, a drifter loose on the hot wind. It was like Delia, he decided, to notice little things that dug into his pride.

When he went downstairs and crossed to the court house, Jim Banning was waiting, his boots propped high on the spur-scarred desk. Banning ran skinny fingers through his bone-white hair.

"Guess you want my guns," Jeff said.

Banning grunted and shifted his lanky body with the weariness of a cowman who'd never accustomed himself to the footwork of tramping Spur's dusty streets. "Nope," he said slowly, bushy eyebrows lifting, "you might need 'em."

"Meaning—?"

"That the Blanchard boys will be back. You'll have to shoot or pull out of town."

Jeff felt himself growing rigid. "I don't want any trouble," he said. "I came to stay this time." In his own mind he'd known that somehow it would shake around to this.

"You'll have to choose." The marshal was staring thoughtfully at the reward notices tacked in aimless pattern on the wall. "But if you build some smoke, I'll have to take you in. This town has tamed down a lot, Jeff. No trail herds through here any more. People go to church and

nesters come in wagons."

"Tell that to the Blanchards," Jeff snapped. "They don't seem to know." Irritated, he got up, but the older man paid no attention.

"I don't understand it all." Banning might have been talking to himself, his muttering voice sounded so slow and deliberate. "Ed and Dave aren't blood brothers. Old Tom Blanchard, who moved in after you left, took Ed in when he was just a nubbin, and gave him a name. But when Tom died, he left the ranch to Dave. Funny way to do things. They're both wild, but Ed's got the mean streak. He's older, too. I figure Dave'll settle down in time."

Jeff was looking at the seamed, wrinkled face. "What if something happened to Dave?"

The marshal's gray head jerked. "Why, the ranch would go to Ed." Abruptly, he pulled down his boots and stood up, gape-mouthed. "*Say!*"

JEFF was already at the door. "Figure it out for yourself," he rapped harshly. "But no gun-crazy kid is going to run me out."

"Hold on, Jeff." Banning was swinging around the desk. "Didn't Delia tell you about Cathy?"

"Yeah." Jeff couldn't force down the hoarse sarcasm. "And maybe you think I should give her away. Down at the church you talked about. That's a good one." He was striding through the door when he heard Banning's voice, high and sharp.

"You—you damned fool—she's marryin' Dave Blanchard!"

Jeff jerked, froze. He stood very still, slowly straightening. Something sick churned in his stomach, and then he was outside, with the almost pleading voice drumming in his ears. Decision was strong in his mind as he paced to the hotel steps. But Jeff Cole had never run, he told himself. Never! A man had his pride. He looked down the street and felt a sudden urge to go on to the dress shop. Yet if he saw her, he knew that they'd only talk again in the same aimless, hurting circles. Deliberately, he turned and walked inside.

After supper he sat on the long front porch, back in the shadows, and smoked till the street's traffic slackened and died and, the yellow fingers of light spilling from the Texas House, finally snapped out. The street was dark, with the hot wind rising and moaning, when he tramped upstairs.

It was a bleak, gusty world of grit and wind when he came down for breakfast. Afterward, from his place on the porch, he saw Delia and a girl move along the street on the far side. Delia walked with her head straight, set, not looking his way. Jeff didn't have to tell himself that the girl was Cathy, though he hadn't seen her in ten years now. She was Delia at eighteen, with the same slimness, the same head-turning darkness, the same light swing to her walk. Watching them disappear in a store, he had a left-out feeling.

When Jim Banning limped over in his sore-footed way from the courthouse, there was a question close to the surface in the mild eyes as he looked up and halted.

"Fine day for ridin'," he observed. "Poor day for sittin'."

The invitation was plain enough, but Jeff shook his head. "I'll take the sitting," he said with a flat refusal. "Maybe I'll look for a job. Maybe I'll just sit here and watch Spur ride by. But I won't run. If the Blanchards come helling, I'll be here. Could be they'll back out."

"They won't."

"Damned if I'll run."

"I was afraid of that." Banning spread his bony hands wide and shrugged his slack shoulders. "Still a good day for traveling." Then he moved down the street, wearily starting his rounds.

Doubt knotted up inside Jeff, a reminder of his hard-headedness. He turned it over in his mind. It would be easier all around if he just rode off, left Spur as it was. He was thinking about it when he saw dust streaks clouding the road into

town. Two men were riding at a steady trot and suddenly Jeff knew, even before he could make out the riders.

He saw them ride onto Main Street. Something grew cold within him and he got up, slowly, carefully. Reason told him that he was two against one. And he felt a reluctance, a hesitation, as he stepped inside and turned to watch. Almost casually they rode past the Texas House. Dave Blanchard had an easy looseness with his swagger, a reckless look in his swinging glance. Ed Blanchard was heavy in the saddle, flat-nosed face slanted down, beady eyes searching the street.

THEY pulled up once, looking. Jeff couldn't hear them, but he saw the rapid working of young Blanchard's jaws in a hard-imaged face, and the sullen expression of Ed Blanchard didn't change. They rode on and Jeff was aware of a cool sweat breaking over him. He couldn't run, he kept telling himself with a surge of the old pride. He didn't want to run.

Grim, he was standing stiff-legged as Cathy walked out of the store. She shaded her eyes against the sun. Her face changed with a quick, pleased expectance when Dave Blanchard swung toward her. Their glances met, held level, till Ed Blanchard's thick lips moved. Jeff caught the unwilling, laggard lift of the boy's rein hand. The same awareness that Jeff had sensed in the saloon flashed over him—Ed Blanchard was the trouble-maker, the one to watch. Cathy's eyes were puzzled, hurt. She was looking after them as the brothers pointed their horses down street. Jeff couldn't take his eyes off the girl. He was seeing her doubt and bewilderment, her troubled, small-girl face.

He was swinging away, half up the protesting board steps of the lobby, before he realized what he was about to do. Jeff Cole, the gunfighter who had never backed down, was running from a fight. He hurried to his cramped room, rolled up the thin blanket. Downstairs, he left a dollar at the clerk's empty desk, took a quick glance at the street. The Blanchards had gone. Out in front, Delia had joined Cathy.

Relief ran through him, relief and regret. He took them in with one long glance, the slim woman and the dark-eyed, pretty girl. Then he was wheeling down the long hall that opened on the back entrance. At the door, he looked both ways, stepped to the alley. His spurs made a jingling discord as he ran to the livery stable. There was a pole corral in back, closing in half a dozen horses, but Jeff's animal wasn't there. He climbed up, jumped down and headed for the dark opening of the barn. It was quiet, he realized, almost too quiet. He heard the muffled stamping from the stalls, the rustle of muzzles nosing hay.

Stepping inside, he could hear his own ragged breathing. The dank smell of horses was strong. Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the near-darkness. Down the runway he could pick out the rumps of haltered animals. He saw his gelding quartered near the front, close by the stable office where the light broke the gloom. His heart was slugging a drumbeat in his chest when he went forward.

Long-striding, he reached the gelding's stall. Searching, he found the saddle blanket and slung it over the broad back. With a grunt, he lifted the heavy stock saddle from the top pole of the stall. Then he heard a scuffing behind him.

Suspicion hit him and he was spinning around. One hand rigidly gripping a Colt, Dave Blanchard stepped from the office. His thin face was white and strained, the cheekbones like round, pushed-out knobs.

"Running?" His voice was hollow and he attempted a sneer as he stood blocking the runway. "Owlhoots ain't so tough."

"Me?" Jeff wet dry lips. "I'm just riding out. Maybe I'm doing you a favor." But a question was turning over in his mind. Where was Ed Blanchard? Jeff's eyes flicked to the murky depths on the kid's right. Something was lumped there! It moved and he saw the heavy-boned body of the older Blanchard shape itself along the light's edge. Ed's arm was bent, a gun in his hand.

"Drop that saddle," the voice grated

harshly.

Slowly, Jeff let the saddle creak down and stepped back. He shifted his gaze to the street, hoping to see Jim Banning.

"Not this time," Ed Blanchard jeered. "He's down the street—too far to help you."

"If I know Jim," Jeff said with a certainty he didn't feel, "he'll be comin' down here quick." But with a dismal realization he remembered how slow and tortuous the marshal moved.

THE big man edged into the light, scowling darkly.

"Come on, Dave," he snarled. "Make him draw."

Hands straight down, Jeff saw decision working along the straight line of Dave's mouth. Somehow the reckless challenge was draining from the face.

"Ed's prodding you, Dave," Jeff warned in a flat tone. "It's your hide, not his own, that he's risking."

Dave seemed to hesitate, and Jeff saw him swallow hard. There was a flickering doubt, almost revulsion, in the wide, fixed eyes. Yet he still gripped the gun stubbornly. Something flicked at the edge of Jeff's vision, a man running from across the street, as Ed Blanchard's voice shrilled:

"Get him, Dave—now!"

In a blur of motion, Jeff saw Ed Blanchard wheeling. But his gun was swinging toward Dave and Dave seemed frozen. Jeff's hand jerked, forking out the Colt. He whipped two shots along the rim of the muddy, confused shadows. His gun roared almost together with Ed Blanchard's—the flashes in the mealy light bright and stabbing. Lead whined against the stall partition, clapped off abruptly. Now Jeff heard a dragged-out grunt. He started to shoot again, but the broad frame was swaying. The gun hand dropped and Ed Blanchard appeared to fold with a lazy, sprawling reluctance.

Spinning on his heels, Jeff saw Dave still standing. Boots planted wide, he stood rooted in a dull kind of haze. The pistol looked awkward and heavy.

"Put it up, kid," Jeff said wearily.

Dave let the gun drop loosely, as if Jeff's words were slow to sink in. His bulging eyes showed a puzzled astonishment.

"You—you went for him." Dave's grunt was choked. He shook his head. "You didn't draw on me."

Jeff heard the booming beat of somebody running on the street. He went past Dave and looked down, suddenly weary all through. Ed Blanchard was a huddled shape, unmoving.

Voices came to Jeff, high, excited. He heard Jim Banning call sharply, "Come out of there, Dave. Where's Jeff?"

Dave Blanchard was turning and muttering, "He didn't try for me. He got Ed."

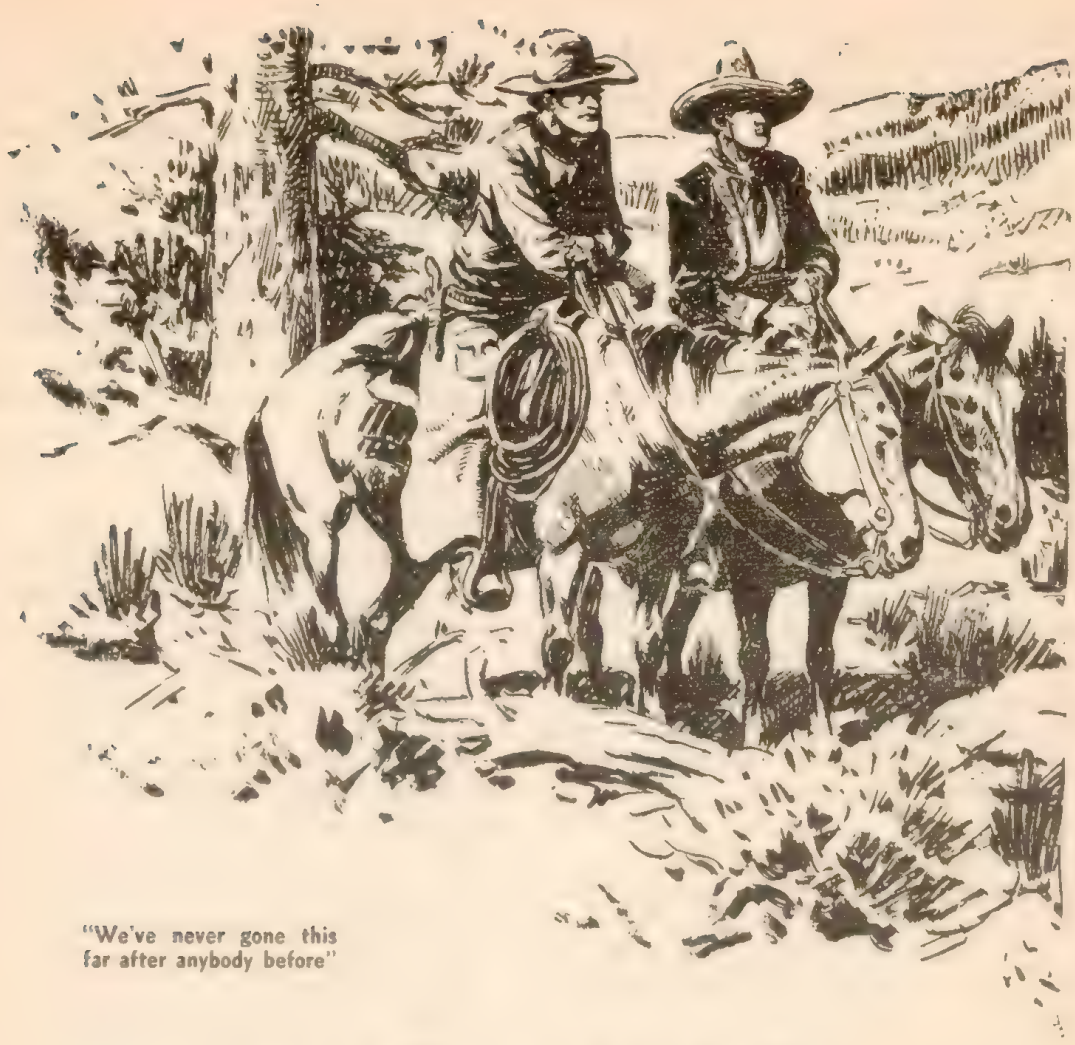
"Good thing he did," Banning snapped. "You lucky damn fool. I saw it, comin' across. Ed's been tryin' to frame you in a gun fight for a long time. I see it now. He figured you'd force Jeff Cole to draw. If Jeff missed, Ed was aimin' to get you. With you out of the way, Ed would get the ranch and Jeff would be hanged for killing you—if you didn't finish the job." The marshal's voice lifted, calling urgently, "Jeff—you all right?"

As Jeff crossed to the knot of men, Dave glanced up at him sheepishly. "Cole—Jeff Cole," he said in sudden understanding. "My God!"

Jeff didn't explain. He was looking at the gathering crowd. His head jerked up as he saw Delia standing to one side, hands clenched, pulled back against her. There was a girl there, too, big-eyed and dark. He elbowed a man aside and faced Delia. Her breath came drawn out.

"I came as fast as I could," she said. "Jim told me."

He was hungry and desperate for her, and he took a step. She looked up at him and he held back. Her eyes dropped from his face to his shirt. Slowly, her fingers reached up to the jagged tear of the pocket, and he felt the warm spread of her hand. His arms were sliding around her and above the babble of the crowd, he heard a girl's voice, like Delia's, calling frantically for Dave Blanchard.



"We've never gone this far after anybody before"

THE HUNT

By RICHARD MATHESON

A sheriff follows his code to its cruel desert payoff!

THERE were three of us. Mark was leading, with Windy and me behind. We were Mark's deputies. We were on a hunt.

Mark rode far up ahead of us. He looked small on his horse. His shoulders were slumped. He kept his head down. His eyes stuck to the ground looking for hoof marks.

Windy and I rode side by side. Windy was a fat guy. The heat was getting him more than either Mark or me. Windy had his teeth clenched and he wasn't breathing. He was hissing. Blubber sweated right through his shirt and made it black. His fleshy round face was red and covered with big drops of sweat.

I was skinny. The heat didn't get me so bad.

"How long we gonna keep this up?"

Willy gasped.

"Long as Mark says," I told him.

Windy shifted weight on the saddle.

"Where's he takin' us?" he groaned, "Into the next state?"

"I reckon," I said.

"Well, he's crazy," Windy said. "You know we never gone this far after anybody before."

I shrugged.

"This ain't just anybody'" I said.

"Maybe to him it ain't."

"Save your breath," I told him.

Windy pursed his fat lips and blew out a loud breath. He picked at the bandana around his neck and mopped his face.

"Gosh, it's hot," he said.

He lifted up his canteen and took a long drink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and let the canteen drop down against the side of his horse.

"Look at him," he said. "He doesn't even know where he is. All he knows is get the kid, get the kid."

"Yeah."

"Just driving us on. And for what?"

I didn't say anything. I took a swallow of water.

"Well, I'm gettin' sick of it," Windy said. "I ain't followin' no man who ain't in his right mind."

"Take it easy," I said. "Mark's all right."

"All right!" growled Windy. "Maybe you call it all right."

I didn't. It's not all right when a man never talks, keeps riding ahead as if he wanted to lose you. It wasn't all right for a man never to get any sleep.

Nights when we'd bed down, Mark would sit in front of the fire staring at the flames. And, sometimes, when I woke hours later, he was still sitting, holding his pistol maybe and spinning the cylinder around slowly. He hadn't got more than a few hours sleep since we started three days before.

Just driving himself. And us along with him. Making his horse travel till he had to rest it or kill it. Never easing up. Willy was probably right. Mark wasn't in his right mind.

And that figured.

We were hunting down his son.

IN THE evening we camped down in a little glade near a stream. Soon as he'd unsaddled his horse and tethered it to graze, Mark went up a hill with his glasses and looked around the country side. I watched him up there, standing on a flat-topped boulder, turning slowly, not missing an inch of the landscape.

He was up there till darkness started rolling in over the hills.

We had grub ready by the time he came down.

"See anything?" I asked him.

He squatted down by the fire and held his hands over it. He didn't say anything. Just shook his head once.

"Ain't we gone far enough?" Windy asked, a thick piece of bacon bulging out his cheeks.

Mark raised his dark eyes and looked at Windy. Then he lowered them again without speaking.

"How far we goin'?" Windy kept on.

I said, "Shut up," to him with my lips but Windy didn't pay no attention.

"We're running out of food," he said.

Mark stood up.

"Go back then," he said quietly. I knew the tone. I'd heard him use it dozens of times; just before he outdrew killers who wanted to try his speed.

Willy heard it too. The bacon stuck in his throat. He coughed violently. I gave him a slap on the back and his eyes watered.

Then I handed Mark a cup of coffee.

He took it and drank a little, squatting down again and staring at the ground.

I noticed how the metal star on his chest glinted in the firelight. I looked up at his eyes. They didn't flicker. They could have been a dead man's eyes.

His mouth was a bloodless line under his bushy mustache. The hot sun had burned his skin a fiery red. His cheeks were dried up. Little pieces of skin flaked off them.

"Some bacon?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Lookee Mark," Windy said, "it's not just myself I'm thinkin' of. It's the horses."

Mark glanced at him.

"The horses are almost broke," Windy argued.

Mark shook his head.

"Well, I'm broke," Willy complained, washing down his bacon with coffee.

"Go back then," Mark repeated.

Willy glanced at me. Then he shrugged and scratched his head. He got up with a grunt and lumbered down to the stream to fill his canteen.

"Mark," I said.

He kept staring at the ground.

"Listen Mark," I said, "I know how you feel. But you're just killing yourself."

One end of his mouth twitched into a half smile.

"This ain't a private show," I said.

"I'm bringin' him in," he said.

"Dead or alive?" I asked cruelly.

His eyes flicked up and he looked at me, for a second, with a scared look; like a father's eyes would get if he was afraid for his son.

Then the steely glint was back. He lowered his eyes to the ground.

"Why not let him go?" I said. "We're way out of our territory now anyway. No one could say you ain't tried."

He threw the rest of his coffee into the fire. It hissed on the burning wood. Then he tossed the cup on a poncho and stood up.

"All right Mark," I said, "he's your boy. If you want him shot, that's your business."

He stood watching me, his eyes reflecting the fire. His hands were clenched at his sides.

"Go back then," he said.

"I ain't goin' anywhere," I said, "I'm gettin' paid for this."

I drank some coffee.

"So are you," I added.

He pressed his lips together tight. We kept looking at each other.

[*Turn page*]

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"We're leaving when the moon's up," he said.

I watched him melt into the shadows. There was nothing more I could say or do, so I squatted there eating bacon.

Willy came back and plopped down on the grass.

"I'm dead," he groaned.

"Get some sleep," I said, "we're leavin' when the moon's up."

"What!" griped Willy, "I can't. By gosh, I can't do it."

"Go back then."

"Now don't you start that," he said.

"Shut up and get some rest," I said.

He spread out his poncho, stretched out on it and pulled his hat over his eyes.

"What were you and Mark talking about?" he asked.

"Nothin'," I said.

He let it go. I heard him breathing heavily. After I finished my coffee I stretched out too.

"What we gonna do when we find him?" muttered Windy.

"That's a question," I said.

"S'pose he's dangerous?" Windy asked.

"Ask the two men he shot," I answered.

"Ohhhh," groaned Windy, rolling on his side, "how can I sleep when you talk like that?"

After a while I heard him snoring. And I heard Mark's boots come back to the fire. Then it was quiet except for the crackling fire.

WHEN the moon was high, we saddled up and started off again. It was cold and we had to wear jackets. Windy had a change of complaints.

"Man, you can't win," he said, "this weather gets you both ways."

"Yep," I said.

After a while Windy said, "Tom, why you s'pose Mark is trying so hard to find his kid?"

I shrugged and drew up my jacket collar.

"I don't know."

"Don't make sense," Windy said.

"It's his business."

"We're here too ain't we?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"I don't get it. Mark was always so nuts about the kid. I remember when Reb was born. Old Mark hoppin' around, slapping people on the back, laughin' and handin' out cigars. Never seen the like."

"Um."

"It weren't like him," Windy said, "him hard as nails; fastest man with a gun I ever seen. Always quiet. And him, runnin' around laughing and shaking people's hands. It didn't make sense."

I smiled grimly.

"Yeah," I said, "I remember."

"And all the time, Mark giving Reb everything he wanted. Spoiling the kid rotten. Candy, toys, a pony—what a brat. But could we say anything ab—"

"Oh, shut up," I said, "I know about it well as you."

"Well then," he insisted, "why's he drivin' so hard to hunt down his own kid?"

"It's his duty."

"You kiddin'?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'm kiddin'."

We rode for hours under the moonlight. Every once in a while Mark would get off his horse and look around. Windy and I would stop and sit there watching his dark form move around on the ground.

Then Mark would swing into his saddle and we'd go on.

By the time the sky started to get gray, we'd covered about twenty miles. Windy was half asleep on his horse, his fat bulk weaving on the saddle. I rode close and gave him a dig in the ribs to keep him from falling off. He sat up with a gasp and dropped his stubby fingers on his rifle stock.

"Not yet Windy," I said, "don't start shooting yet."

He looked around bleary-eyed.

"I ain't doin' no shootin'," he said sleepily, "like as not Mark would fill me with holes if I shot his kid."

"I don't know," I said.

Windy was awake now. And ready to complain.

"That's the thing I don't like about this," he said, "here we're huntin' down

this kid. And if he gets trapped and won't give himself up, we're supposed to shoot him down. But who the hell's gonna, when he's the sheriff's kid?"

"Don't worry about it," I said.

"Sure, sure," he moaned, "don't worry about it. Will we ever get back?"

"Sure," I said, "we'll get back. In a year, maybe."

Windy groaned and stretched on his saddle.

"I'm growin' to the horse," he said, "I'm growin' to it."

MARK'S horse was standing on a rise. Mark was scanning the countryside with his glasses.

Way out, rays of sun were sticking up over the horizon.

I rode up beside him.

"See anything?" I asked.

He shook his head and kept looking.

"Good," I said, "maybe he's in the next state."

His half-closed eyes left the glasses and surveyed me. His mouth twisted into a humorless smile.

"I'm not forcing you," he said hoarsely, "you and Windy can go back any time you want."

There didn't seem any anger left in him. He was too exhausted, I guess. I thought maybe I could take advantage of it.

"Look Mark," I said, "this is no good. We've lost him. Let's go back."

"No," he said.

"We don't want to find him."

"I have to find him," he said, lifting the glasses again.

"Why," I asked, "for God's sake, why? You want to see your own boy killed?"

He shook his head.

"You know he won't give himself up," I said, "you know that better than me."

He didn't answer.

"So what's your wife gonna say when you bring back her boy, dead?"

His head snapped around and he glared at me. His hand slipped down to his gun.

I didn't budge or blink an eyelash.

[*Turn page*]

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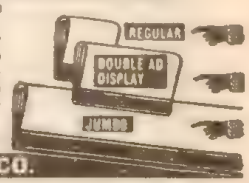

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"Mark, you don't want to kill your own kid," I said, "You can't."

He dug in spurs and left me there. I watched him ride away.

Windy reined up beside me and we trotted along.

"What were you talkin' about?" he asked.

"Nothin'."

"You always talk about nothin' don't you?" he growled.

"Yeah," I said, "always."

"I don't s'pose you argued him into turning back?"

"I don't s'pose I did," I said.

The sun came up. Light spotted the hilltops and the rocks. Then it spread all over. Steam rose from the damp grass. And soon it started to get hot again.

"I'm goin' back," Windy threatened. But he kept riding.

After a while we stopped and had breakfast. Mark took his coffee up on a slope and we saw him scanning the landscape with his glasses.

"What makes a man go on like that?" Windy asked.

I drank some coffee.

"I don't know," I said" you know him well as I do."

"I don't get it," Windy said, "I don't get him goin' after his own kid."

"Yeah."

"Would you?" Windy asked, "would you hunt down your own kid?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, I wouldn't," he said.

"You might," I said, "if you felt responsible."

"Responsible for what?"

"For the kind of kid he was."

We ate in silence a while.

"It's lousy ain't it?" Windy said.

"Yeah."

"You know," Windy said, "I been thinking. Ain't it funny a kid who had everything should turn bad?"

"Not very."

"You know what I mean. He had everything he wanted. What made him go bad?"

I threw away the rest of my coffee. I

didn't feel hungry.

"Maybe Mark gave him too much," I said.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"Figure it out," I said.

I WENT to my horse and started rubbing it down. Over its back I saw Mark sitting on a rock, looking through those glasses. And, inside me, I felt the sickness he must have felt. A fear that made me feel eaten out and hollow. Hunting down his own son. Hunting him down because it was his job. Because it was his duty.

After a while I watched Mark come shuffling down the slope. He didn't see me. He walked over to the fire and poured himself some more coffee. His eyes were bloodshot and the red of his skin made his whiskers stand out like gray steel wire. Windy said something to him but didn't get an answer. Then Windy got up and went over to his horse.

Mark took off his hat and wiped sweat off his forehead. Without his hat, he looked old. His hair was gray. It was plastered down on his forehead. Without his hat he looked even older than he was. He looked like a beaten old man.

While I watched, Mark took out his pistol with an effortless motion and checked the cylinder again. It made a shiver run down my spine to see it. His face was expressionless. He slid the gun back in its holster.

He stuck on his hat as I went back to the fire.

"Are we close to him?" I asked.

"Almost," he said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

He started out of the clearing.

"Mark," I called after him. He stopped without turning.

"What are we going to do when we get to him?" I asked.

I couldn't see his face. But I could imagine how it looked. His lean shoulders twisted.

"I'll tell you," he said. He walked out of the glade quickly.

We broke camp and started out again.

[*Turn page*]

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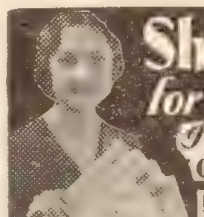

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IT WAS about two that afternoon when we topped a ridge and saw the lone horseman way down in a valley. He was riding slowly along the river bank.

Windy and I looked at Mark. We didn't speak.

Mark took out his glasses and tortured himself by checking. His mouth tightened as he focused on the rider. We all knew it was Reb. We knew his clothes, his horse and the way he sat it.

Mark lowered the glasses.

"Well?" I said.

He didn't speak.

"What do we do now?" Windy asked.

"Follow him," Mark said.

We sat there without moving, looking down at Reb. I felt a cold weight in my stomach. I glanced aside and saw the look on Windy's face. He wasn't complaining now. He just sat there quietly, looking down at Mark's son.

"Mark?" I said.

He grunted.

"What happens when we catch up to him?"

He hesitated. I saw his throat move.

"We bring him back," he said.

"What if he fires on us?" I said.

"He won't."

"What if he does?"

"I told you," he said, "you and Windy can go back any time you want."

"That's no answer," I said.

He half stood in the saddle and drove his horse over the edge and down the steep slope at top speed. The horse half-skidded down the soft shale.

"God's sake," Windy said, "what the hell's he made of?"

I sat watching Mark's horse plunge down the hill.

"Don't kid yourself," I said. "He's dyin' inside."

"I don't get it," he moaned, "I just don't get it."

We watched longer.

"Don't we follow?" Windy asked.

"Wait a while," I said, "let him do it his way."

When Mark reached the bottom of the hill and started along the river bank, I

nudged my horse.

"Let's go," I said.

We skidded down the hill. Far below us, Mark rode. His eyes never left the figure of his son, riding ahead.

When Windy and I had made the river bank we saw Reb's horse break into a gallop. It was too far away to see him clearly. I was glad. I didn't want to see his face when he saw his own father hunting him.

We spurred forward. The only sound was that of our horses' hoofs thudding in the sandy riverbank. I kept watching Mark and Reb.

Suddenly, Reb drove his horse into the woods. Mark rode a while and then he turned off, too. They both disappeared into the thick underbrush.

We reached the spot where the hoof marks turned. We turned off into the woods. I couldn't hear anything but the sound of my own horse's chest crashing through the underbrush. I tried to look ahead but I couldn't. I had to keep ducking to miss branches.

It was too thick. I slowed down my horse. It picked its way through gingerly, tossing its head to the sides and snorting. I looked back and saw Windy following.

Then I reached a clearing.

I saw Mark's horse tethered to a pine.

I saw Reb's horse crumpled on the ground on the other side of a fallen tree. I jumped down and ran over to it. It was dead of a broken neck.

I tied up my horse as Windy rode into the clearing.

"What's up?" he gasped.

"Stay here," I said, "Mark's goin' after him on foot."

He started to say something. But I didn't listen. I started out of the clearing and up the steep hill. I tried to follow the trail of broken bushes and trampled-down brush.

It was like an oven in there. Heat seemed to crush me in an airless fist. In a minute I was covered with sweat. My holster kept getting caught in the under-

[*Turn page*]

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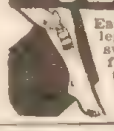

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brush which was thorny and thick.

Every once in a while, I stopped to see if I could hear them. I kept climbing.

Then, to the side, I heard a voice call out. I didn't hear what he said. But I knew it was Reb.

I moved over, trying to keep quiet. I heard a shot ring out and whine down the hillside.

I reached a clump of bushes and peered through them.

Down below me, I saw Reb crouching behind a rock. He had his gun in his right hand. I looked quickly down the hill.

Mark was walking up. His gun was still in his holster. He wasn't even trying to hide himself. He walked upright as though he was on a stroll.

"Go back!" Reb shouted, "don't come no further!"

He held up his gun. I reached down for mine. Then I stopped. I didn't want the killing on my hands. I leaned forward and watched.

Mark wasn't saying anything. He just kept walking. His face was tight. There wasn't any expression in it. His hands hung at his sides as he climbed up, closer to his son.

"Pa don't!" cried Reb. "I'm not goin' back!"

Mark didn't even pause. I could hear his boots on the pine needles now. I could see him clearly; his tired lined face, the eyes, dead looking, staring ahead.

"Pa!" yelled Reb.

He raised his gun. Mark's mouth tightened. But he kept walking.

I saw how Reb was shaking. His face glinted with sweat. His shirt was dark with it.

He backed away from the rock.

Then he pushed up and fired quickly, his face wild and frightened. He missed. The ground exploded at Mark's feet, spraying his legs with dirt.

I gasped as Mark's hand shot down suddenly and he jerked out his gun.

Reb fired again and Mark's body lurched with the impact of the slug. He stood there weaving, staring up at his

son. Then his cheek twitched and he fell forward on his face.

I pulled out my gun.

"Drop it!" I yelled.

Reb's head jerked around. He couldn't see me.

"Don't shoot!" he cried, throwing away his gun. He pressed back against a rock and stood there shaking as I slid down a steep bank.

I kept him covered as I bent over Mark.

Mark was dead. The gun was tight in his still hand.

I noticed that his finger had pulled the trigger. I checked the cylinder.

And, for some reason, it didn't surprise me much to find every chamber empty.

I guess I sort of knew it all the way.

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

three men left the store together:

"Now, you keep this under your hat, won't you?"

"Now what do you make o' that?" one old miner said to his companion.

"Durned if I know, but I can guess," was the answer. "I know Frank and I'm going to hunt him up, right now. Come along."

Before the next sunset, the sole topic of conversation in the winter-gripped camp was the big new placer strike in the Wolf Mountain country, in Wyoming, some three hundred miles west of the Black Hills.

"Up Crazy Woman Creek, then over a big range and down the valley. I know! That's the straight stuff. Got it from Johnny White. He knows a fellow that knows the gal that's living with Frank," reported one to a breathless circle of cronies.

"Biggest thing since Nigger Bar in California," confided another over a drink in the Bella Union.

Veterans of the Bannack stampede and the Seven Devils rush in Idaho, men from Blackhawk and California Gulch in Colorado, E-town in New Mexico, tenderfeet from the corn belt—all caught the fever. In spite of the winter snows which had already filled the creek beds level from bank to bank and piled up drifts in the lee of every obstacle, the sole collective thought was, "Let's go!"

But an unexpected obstacle arose. The early winter had made it impossible to move heavy freight wagons over the miserable roads and the merchants, wise in the ways of Western winters, had laid in their stocks of beans, flour and bacon to last until the spring

[*Turn page*]

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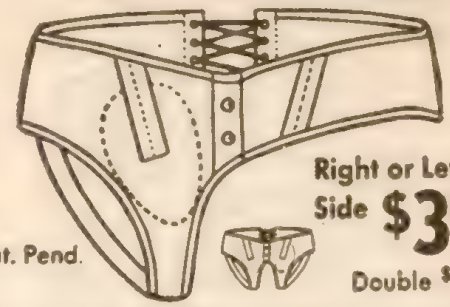

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break-up. So the hundreds of horses and mules used by the freighters, as well as the riding and pack animals of individual prospectors, became liabilities instead of assets.

With almost no feed available, and that held by canny traders at fantastic prices, the horses were taken down to the Spearfish Valley or towards Belle Fourche, there to paw out a precarious existence from beneath the crusted snow until the grass should green up in the spring and the roads again become passable. Riding and pack stock were sold to the liverymen in Deadwood for little or nothing, and by them also sent out of the hills to winter pasture.

Moved lower, that is, by all but one liveryman—"Red" Clark. The unanimous opinion was that "Red must be crazy to try and keep all that stuff up over winter." The stalls in his big barns on lower Main Street were all full; his corrals were bulging with milling animals fighting over their meager rations.

When the Wolf Mountain stampede started, those who had horses on winter pasture hastened to get them; the rest besieged the Clark barns—and Red came into his own. Red seemed to know from the beginning that there was going to be a run on his supply of hay-burners, and the first comers, while they secured the pick of the animals, certainly paid dearly for the privilege. Later buyers had to take what was left, with no reduction in price.

Well warned by long experience in such matters, the old-timers, while just as excited and eager as the greenest "apple-knocker" fresh from the East, did prepare for a hard and dangerous trip. Others, less versed in Frontier ways, were poorly equipped and scantily provisioned.

All, old-timer and tenderfoot alike, suffered severely from the blizzards which raged on the eastern Wyoming plains. Many turned back after the first day or two; others were never seen again. Some, including John S. McClintock, whose biography is the source of the best information about the stampede and who was a real pioneer in "The Hills," were forced to return, not by the rigors of the trip, which they were perfectly willing to endure, but by the human failure of their companions.

McClintock himself was one of a party which was traveling in two wagons. He had helped organize it and had rounded up a couple of teamsters who had agreed to haul the men's supplies to the new strike for $6.00 a hundredweight, no matter how far it was or how long it took.

One night they were forced to make camp on a windswept and barren plain. Rolling up in their blankets on the frozen ground, they envied the two teamsters who had spread

their bedrolls in one of the wagons and retired to a sleep properly induced by several shots of "Number 10 Best." During the night the half-starved horses, tethered to the other wagon, worked their heads under the wagon sheet and into the meager supply of oats carried for them. Feasting without hindrance, and wasting on the ground what they did not eat, they were found at daybreak by one of the party.

His curses awakened the rest, and when the teamsters were roused from their half-drunken sleep, they refused to go on. When the matter was put to a vote the majority, already sick of the trip, decided to go back. McClintock and the few who were willing and anxious to proceed were shouted down and had no alternative but to accept the verdict.

John Deffenbach, later killed by Indians at his home spread on Sweet Water Creek near the Bear Lodge Mountains in Wyoming, had gathered a herd of two hundred beef cattle and started over the long trail with them, headed for the new camp. The McClintock party had passed the Diffenbach herd a day or two before, and naturally expected to meet them on the back trail. Instead of meeting them, they overtook them heading back for Deadwood Gulch.

To their questioning, John Deffenbach replied that he had met a party of three men who had gotten out of Deadwood ahead of the rest. They had told Deffenbach that, well mounted and properly equipped, they had been all over the country where the Wolf Mountain strike was supposed to be and had found no new placer discovery, no one who had ever heard of such a place, and mighty little of anything else. They informed Deffenbach that, in view of all the circumstances, they were convinced the whole thing was a fake.

Although no one was able to connect the "come-on" men—Slim, and his unnamed partner and Frank—with Red Clark, the fact remains that Clark was the only one who ever got anything out of the deal. He sold, at very handsome prices indeed, somewhere near a hundred head of animals for which there was otherwise no legitimate market to be expected, and very shortly afterward sold his outfit, by then consisting solely of vehicles and empty barns, to the Northwestern Stage and Transportation Company of Deadwood and, according to McClintock, "with well-filled purse went on his way."

Considering the time and place, the surprising thing is not that he did so, but that he was allowed to do so by the victims of what was apparently one of the most heartless and cruel of the many such hoaxes in the annals of the West.

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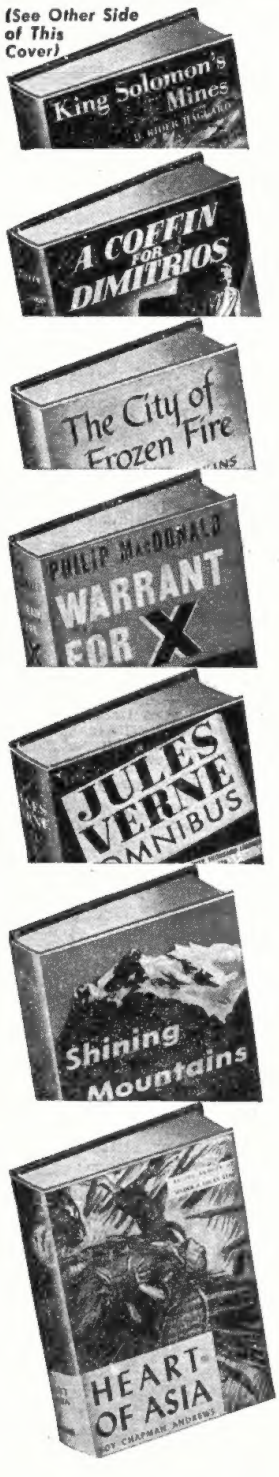

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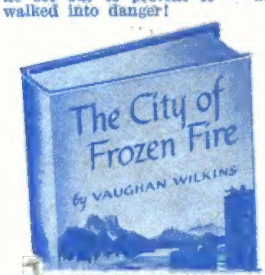

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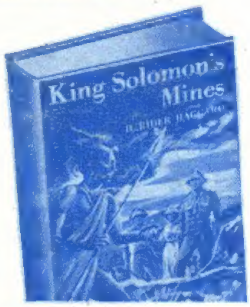

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